NATION

**Mohali building collapse: Death toll climbs to two**

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**Mcap of top-10 most valued firms slumps ₹4.95 lakh crore**

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**India wins Women's U19 T20 Asia Cup against B'desh**

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DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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# EAM talks tough: Won't let others have veto on India's choices

## 'Will do right without intimidation to conform'

**MUMBAI, 22 DEC**

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar has said India can never permit others to have a veto on its choices and will do whatever is right in the national interest and for the global good without being intimidated to "conform".

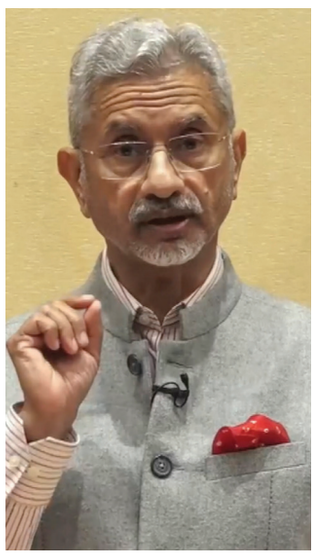
In a video message for a function in Mumbai on Saturday, he said when India is etched more deeply in global consciousness; its repercussions are truly profound.

In a world grappling with unhealthy habits, stressed lifestyles or recurring climate events, there is much learning to be gained from India's heritage. But the world will only know when the countrymen take pride in it, he said.

In an age of globalisation, technology and tradition must march together, said Jaishankar.

"Bharat will inevitably progress but it must do so without losing its Bharatiyata. Only then can we truly emerge as a leading power in a multi-polar world," he said.

Jaishankar was conferred the 27th SIES Sri Chandrasekarendra Saraswati National Eminence Award. The awards are given in four fields – Public Leadership, Community Leadership, Human endeavour, Science and Technology and Social Leadership – with primacy on spiritualism.



External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar **PHOTO: PTI**

- In an age of globalisation, technology and tradition must march together, said Jaishankar

The awards are named after the late 68th Seer of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam Sri Chandrasekarendra Saraswathi.

The foreign minister did not attend the event but sent his video message.

Jaishankar said India is an exceptional nation because it is a civilisation state. Such a country will only exercise influence when it fully leverages its cultural strengths in the global arena, he said.

Jaishankar said India is poised today at a crucial juncture. On the one hand, the last decade has demonstrated that it has the capabilities, confidence and, most importantly, the commitment to advance development across broad fronts. —*PTI*

**RENOVATION DEMANDED**

# Now, old temple structure found in UP's Khurja

**BULANDSHAHR, 22 DEC**

An old temple structure has been found in Khurja town of this district, sparking demands from right-wing outfits for its renovation.

The development comes over a week after the district administration in Sambhal reopened a temple locked since 1978 following communal riots in the town.

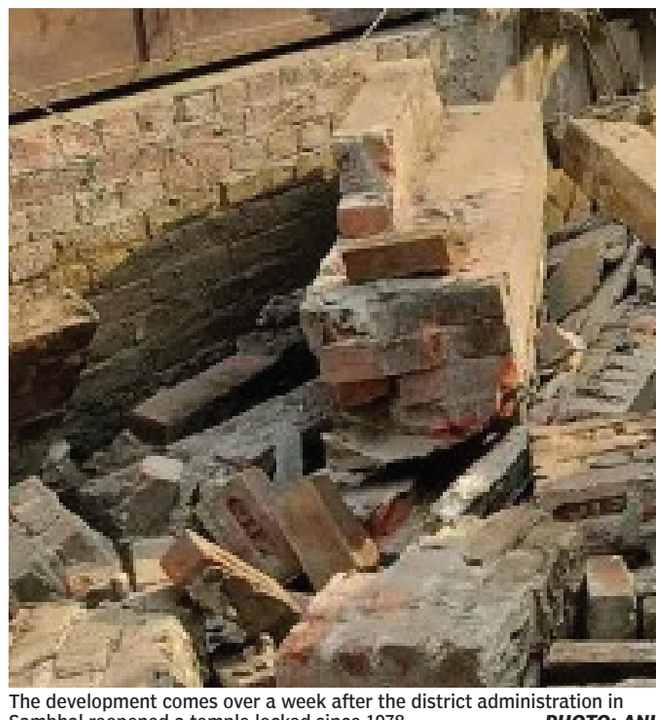
On Sunday, Khurja Sub-divisional Magistrate (SDM) Durgesh Singh said that the temple in Salma Hakan mohalla was constructed by the Jatav community who also performed puja there.

After the Jatav community relocated about over three decades ago, it is said that the idols of the Khurja temple were immersed in a river by a family from the community, the SDM said.

Singh clarified that the temple structure is intact and there are no disputes over the site. The matter is being looked into, he said.

Meanwhile, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Jatav Vikas Manch have urged authorities to renovate the temple to allow for religious activities to resume.

On 14 December, Sambhal administration had reopened a temple locked since 1978 following communal riot.



The development comes over a week after the district administration in Sambhal reopened a temple locked since 1978 **PHOTO: ANI**

Meanwhile, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Jatav Vikas Manch have urged authorities to renovate the temple to allow for religious activities to resume.

The Sambhal temple, a stone's throw from the Shahi Jama Masjid, was opened after authorities "stumbled" on it during an anti-encroachment drive. Bhasma Shankar temple houses an idol of Lord Hanuman and Shivling. —*PTI*

***>>>More on Page 4***

# India thrashes WI by 211 runs in opening Women's ODI

**VADODARA, 22 DEC**

India inflicted a crushing 211-run defeat on West Indies following a stellar batting display backed by a five-for from pacer Renuka Singh as the hosts took a 1-0 lead in the three-match women's ODI series here Sunday.

India vice-captain Smriti Mandhana struck her fourth consecutive half-century and shared a 110-run opening-wicket partnership with debutant Pratika Rawal, 40, as the home team made a formidable 314/9 .

The bowlers, led by pacer Renuka Singh (5/29), bundled out the West Indies for 103 runs in 26.2 overs.

- India vice-captain Smriti Mandhana struck her fourth consecutive half-century and shared a 110-run opening-wicket partnership with debutant Pratika Rawal

Continuing her sublime form from the T201s, where she scored three successive half-centuries in India's 2-1 series triumph at Navi Mumbai, Mandhana smashed 91 off 102 balls, studded with 13 boundaries, even as West Indies pressed a total of seven bowlers to contain the on-song opener.

Off-spinner Rawal made her ODI debut with a polished 40 runs off 69 deliveries. Harleen Deol, 44, and skipper Harmanpreet Kaur, 34, then stitched together a 66-run stand before Jemimah Rodrigues scored a quick-fire 31. West Indies left-arm spinner Zaida James took five wickets for 45 runs. —*PTI*

***>>>More on Page 8***

**FOGGY MORNINGS**

Dense fog blanketed the Kempegowda International Airport (KIA) in Bengaluru during the early hours of Sunday. Several areas in the City also reported reduced visibility **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

# MODI RECEIVES KUWAIT'S HIGHEST HONOUR

**KUWAIT CITY, 22 DEC**

Kuwait on Sunday conferred its highest honour - 'The Order of Mubarak Al-Kabeer' - on Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his role in strengthening the good relations between the two countries.

Prime Minister Modi received the honour from Kuwait's Amir Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al Sabah at the Bayan Palace here.

"I am honoured to be conferred the Mubarak Al-Kabeer Order by His Highness the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al Sabah. I dedicate this honour to the people of India and to the strong friendship between India and Kuwait," Modi said in a post on X. The 'Order of Mubarak Al-Kabeer' is a knighthood order of Kuwait.

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said that the conferment of the Mubarak Al-Kabeer Order on Prime Minister Modi is a proud moment for all Indians.

This is the 20th international honour given to PM Modi by a country, officials said.

Modi reached Kuwait on Saturday for a two-day visit. His visit is the first by an Indian Prime Minister to the Gulf nation in 43 years. —*PTI*

***>>>More on Page 3***

# Protesters vandalise actor Allu Arjun's house in Hyderabad

Group of protesters at the residence of Telugu actor Allu Arjun, in Hyderabad, Telangana, on Sunday **PHOTO: PTI**

**HYDERABAD, 22 DEC**

A group of persons, claiming to be members of Osmania University Joint Action Committee, on Sunday vandalised flower pots, threw tomatoes and other things at the residence of top Telugu actor Allu Arjun, demanding justice to the woman who died in 'Pushpa-2' screening stampede here. Some of them climbed the compound wall and threw tomatoes inside.

They raised slogans against Allu Arjun and demanding financial assistance of Rs one crore rupees for victim woman's family.

> **I appeal to all my fans to express their feelings responsibly, as always and not resort to any kind of abusive language or behavior both online and offline** —Allu Arjun, Actor

A placard left by them said crores of rupees are made by making films, while those watching films are dying. The protesters were taken away by the police.

Police sources indicated that Allu Arjun was not at home when the incident happened.

Police security is being provided at the actor's residence in the wake of the vandalism, they said.

Allu Arjun's father and veteran producer Allu Aravind said they would like to observe restraint and that law will take its own course. "You have seen what happened outside our house. But, this is time for us to observe restraint. We should not react to all this at present." —*PTI*

# Srinagar freezes at -8 degrees after 50 years

**SRINAGAR, 22 DEC**

Srinagar recorded its coldest December night in 50 years, dipping to -8.5 degree Celsius as the Chillai Kalan winter phase began. On Sunday morning, temperatures in Srinagar recorded at minus 3.2 degrees Celsius. The freezing temperatures caused Dal Lake's surface to freeze. Srinagar's lowest-ever minimum temperature in this month was minus 12.8 degrees Celsius on 13 December, 1934. Meanwhile, Delhi also experienced severe cold, with fog and a low of 8 degree Celsius. Rajasthan saw similar cold conditions, with Karauli at 4.5 degree Celsius. The shortest day of the year occurred on 21 December, marking the winter solstice. —*Agencies*

# Docs say Dallewal is critical as fast enters 27th day

**CHANDIGARH, 22 DEC**

As Punjab farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal's fast-unto-death entered its 27th day on Sunday, doctors termed his health condition "critical". Doctors attending to him at the Khanauri border protest site reiterated that Dallewal is at the risk of cardiac arrest and multi-organ failure. Dallewal, 70, has been on a fast-unto-death at the Khanauri border point between Punjab and Haryana since 26 November to press the Centre to accept the agitating farmers' demands, including a legal guarantee for MSP on crops. Due to the continuous hunger strike for 27 days, his immunity has become weak, putting him at risk of infection. —*PTI*

***>>>More on Page 4***

**PUBS OPEN TILL 1AM**

# *NY celebrations: Crackers, loudspeakers banned in City*

**BENGALURU, 22 DEC**

Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) and Bengaluru Police have imposed a strict ban on the use of loudspeakers and firecrackers during New Year celebrations in the City. As part of the guidelines, all hotels, restaurants, clubs, and resorts planning to host New Year events are required to secure prior approval from the City police.

In order to ensure safe and orderly celebrations of the New Year 2025, the authorities have emphasised that all celebrations must conclude by midnight. The guidelines further prohibited activities such as obscene dances, nudity, gambling, and similar actions during the celebrations.

To support these measures, the BBMP will manage additional responsibilities, including providing lighting at designated locations, operating health posts, ensuring efficient garbage disposal, and deploying marshals for crowd control.

The major flyovers across the city including Hennur, ITC, Electronics City, Banaswadi, Nagawara and Mahadevapura flyovers will remain shut from 10pm on 31 December until 6am of 1 January.

The prohibition of loudspeakers and firecrackers aims to reduce noise pollution and maintain public order," Bengaluru Police Commissioner Dayananda said. As Bengaluru readies itself for New Year, residents are urged to adhere to guidelines and cooperate with authorities. —*Salar News*

PHOTO: X@CPBLR

**HERE IS A CHECKLIST FOR NEW YEAR**

- All parties must end by 1am
- Major flyovers, except KIA road, closed from 10pm-6am
- Traffic restrictions on MG and Brigade Roads from 8 pm
- 800+ CCTV cameras monitoring key areas
- Female personnel deployed for safety at crowded venues
- Bars and pubs open until 1 am
- Event permissions required
- No loudspeakers or firecrackers allowed

## 5 injured in Electronics City flyover accident

**BENGALURU, 22 DEC**

Five people were injured on early Sunday when their car collided with a median divider on the Electronics City flyover. According to the Electronics City traffic police, the incident occurred around 1.30am. The victims, residents of RT Nagar, were heading towards Hosur when the driver attempted to overtake another vehicle, leading to the crash. Talking to **Salar News** a police officer said that, "Fortunately, all five survived thanks to the vehicle's airbag system. A case has been registered, and an investigation is underway ". Three of the injured in the accident were taken to Victoria Hospital for further treatment. Authorities have urged drivers to follow speed limits and exercise caution on elevated roads to avoid similar accidents. *—Salar News*

PHOTO: X

## Truck overturns on Yeshwanthpur flyover, none hurt

**BENGALURU, 22 DEC**

Two people, including the driver, narrowly escaped injury after a Bolero mini truck carrying sacks of sweet potatoes overturned on the Yeshwanthpur flyover on Sunday. The accident occurred around 5.30am as the truck, travelling from Hubbali to Tamil Nadu, experienced a sudden tyre burst, causing it to tip over. Thankfully, both the driver and the cleaner sustained only minor injuries. The overturned truck scattered its load of sweet potatoes across the road, leading to a significant traffic jam. The congestion was cleared after traffic police arrived, removed the truck, and restored normal traffic flow. A case has been filed at the Yeshwanthpur Traffic Police Station, and investigations are ongoing. *—Salar News*

## Man drives tractor over brother over property dispute

**BELAGAVI, 22 DEC**

A man has been arrested for running a tractor over his younger brother and killing him in a remote village in Belagavi district, allegedly over a property dispute, police said on Sunday According to police, the incident occurred in Yaragatti Taluk under Murgod police station limits on Saturday. Maruti Bavihal, 30, ran the tractor on Gopal, 27, killing him instantaneously. Property dispute is believed to be the reason behind the incident. *—PTI*

## Man held under Goonda Act for prostitution racket

**BENGALURU, 22 DEC**

The Central Crime Branch (CCB) Women's Protection Wing has arrested a habitual offender involved in an interstate prostitution racket under the stringent Goonda Act. The accused, Anil Kumar V, is believed to have operated a human trafficking network that lured women from various states with promises of high-paying jobs, only to force them into prostitution in spas across Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Police reported that Anil Kumar is linked to multiple illegal activities, including human trafficking and rape cases. Four cases have been filed against him at Mahadevapura police station in Bengaluru and in Andhra Pradesh. Following a proposal from the Mahadevapura police and the CCB, Bengaluru Police Commissioner authorized the detention of Anil Kumar under the Goonda Act. He has been sent to Bellari Central Prison. The Goonda Act, or Karnataka Prevention of Dangerous Activities Act, allows for the preventive detention of individuals involved in activities that threaten public order. *—Salar News*

# We have audio and video evidence against Ravi: CM

## Ravi's arrest misuse of power, says Union Minister Pralhad Joshi

**BENGALURU, 22 DEC**

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Sunday said there are audio and video evidence to prove that BJP MLC C T Ravi used derogatory language against state minister Laxmi Hebbalkar on the floor of the Legislative Council on Thursday.

"We are getting the matter investigated because it constitutes a criminal offense. Then why is he (Ravi) asking for judicial inquiry? There is audio and video evidence of him using derogatory language. Many MLCs heard him. It amounts to criminal offense, isn't it?" Siddaramaiah asked.

The chief minister termed the actions of the senior BJP leader as "highly condemnable".

Ravi was arrested for allegedly using abusive language against the Woman and Child Development Minister Laxmi Hebbalkar inside the Council on the concluding day of the winter session of state legislature in Belagavi on 19 December. Later, he was granted bail by the court

CM Siddaramaiah termed the actions of BJP leader CT Ravi as highly condemnable **PHOTO: PTI**

Meanwhile, Union Minister Pralhad Joshi accused the Congress government of "misusing" power.

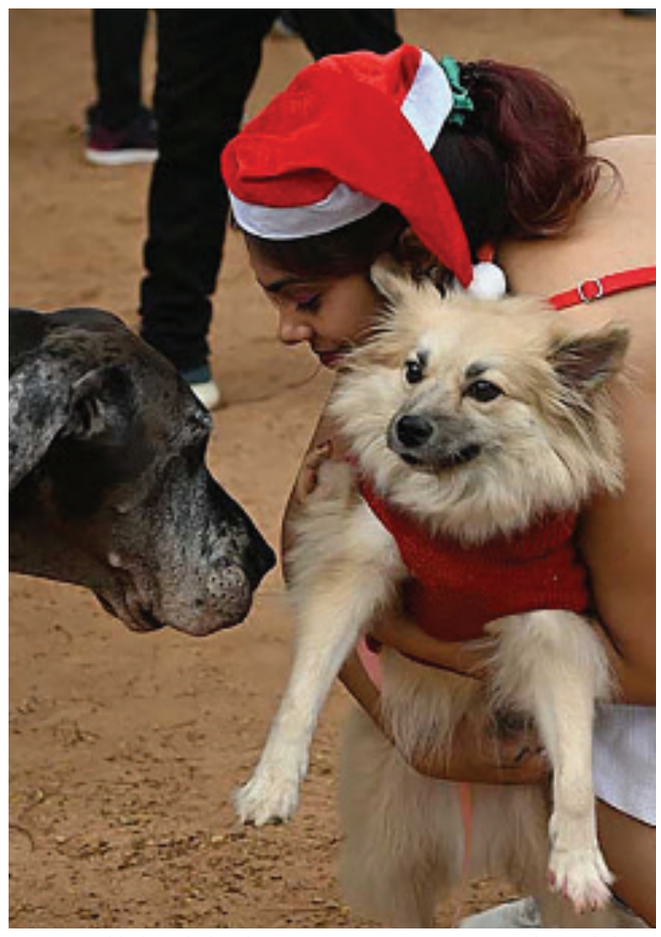
"It is a misuse of power. They do not believe in Democracy and the Constitution," Joshi said. "They are trying to misuse not only the power, they are also trying to curb political activities of their political opponents," he said.

Ravi said that after he was arrested, the police shifted him to four districts arbitrarily. "Why was I arrested? Why was I continuously shifted to four districts? The Chief Minsiter cites security reasons. They find difficulty in providing me security at a police station, but it is easy for them to do so at an isolated place," the BJP leader said.

- Ravi said that the government find difficulty in providing him security at a police station, but it is easy for them to do so at an isolated place

Speaking to reporters at her residence in Belagavi on Friday, Hebbalkar narrated to media persons the alleged incident in the state assembly. "After completing the protest (against remarks of Amit Shah), we were seated. At that time, CT Ravi called Rahul Gandhi a drug addict. In response, I said, 'Even you have been in accidents. Does that make you a murderer?'" she said. *—Agencies*

**BOW WOW EVENT**



A woman with dogs during the Santa Bow Wow 2024 event at dog park, in Cubbon Park on Sunday **PHOTO: PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

## Protect institutions from politics, says SC judge

**BENGALURU, 22 DEC**

India must protect the integrity of its constitutional institutions from outside interference, including those that are politically motivated, said Justice P S Narasimha, Judge, Supreme Court of India, on Sunday.

Justice Narasimha was delivering the Justice E S Ventakaramiah Centennial Memorial Lecture, organised by the National Law School of India University (NLSIU) in Bengaluru.

Justice Venkataramiah served as the 19th Chief Justice of India. He previously served as a judge of the Karnataka High Court, as well as the Advocate General of Mysore. According to the Supreme Court Observer, he was a part of benches that pronounced 720 judgments. Of these, he authored 256 judgments during his term at the Supreme Court.

In his lecture, Justice Narasimha said integrity of the institutions can be maintained only by putting in place safeguards in the appointment, decision making and removal process of individuals who helm these institutions.He also added that the topic of the memorial lecture, 'Reimagining Constitutional Institutions: Integrity, Efficiency,and Accountability' is relevant, as Justice Venkataramiah belonged to that generation of judicial statesmen who played an active role in developing and sustaining institutions.

He lauded the vision of India's constitution-makers who chose to institutionalise the superintendence, direction and control of elections through a body outside the Executive. *—PTI*

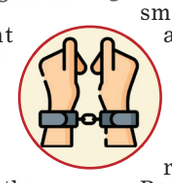
- He lauded the vision of India's constitution-makers who chose to institutionalise the superintendence, direction and control of elections through a body outside the Executive

**CRIME BEAT**

## Man kills drunken friend in rage, held

**BENGALURU, 22 DEC**

Madanayakanahalli police have arrested a man for allegedly killing his friend by smashing his head against a wall in a fit of rage and burning his private parts with a cigarette stub.



The incident reportedly stemmed from a dispute over the victim urinating inside the house while intoxicated.

Police identified the deceased as Pradeepa, 41, a native of Bovi Thimanapalya in Bengaluru North. He had reportedly separated from his wife and was staying at the house of the accused, Chetan, for the past two months.

Police said Pradeepa, an alcohol addict, urinated inside Chetan's house on Thursday night when he was drunk. This enraged Chetan, leading to a heated argument. In a fit of rage, Chetan allegedly grabbed Pradeepa and smashed his head against the wall. When Pradeepa collapsed, Chetan burned his private parts with a cigarette butt. Upon realising that Pradeepa had died, Chetan fled the scene.

When the crime came to light, Madanayakanahalli police to visit the spot and registered a case. Chetan has been arrested and further investigations are underway, the police said. *—Salar News*

## Man killed in Mandya robbery

**MYSURU, 22 DEC**

A miscreant brutally attacked and killed one person while his wife was injured during a robbery at Kyathanahalli in Pandavapura taluk in Mandya district late on Saturday evening.

The attacker who entered the farmhouse of Yashodamma, 55, attacked and overpowered her. Later he killed her husband Ramesh, 60, who was a paralysis patient, and was sleeping in another room.

The accused Mohammed Ibrahim, 22, entered the house of Yashodamma under the pretext of ordering a wood cutting machine parcel when she was watching television around 7pm on Saturday. He attacked the woman with a wood-cutting machine after she opened the door. Yashodamma briefly lost consciousness, and the accused then entered the room and brutally killed Ramesh.

By the time, Yeshodamma regained consciousness and cried for help, the accused locked the room and killed her husband.

With the help of neighbours, Yeshodamma caught the accused handed him over to Srirangapatna police. Ibrahim confessed to the crimeand said that his mounting debts from online gaming had driven him to commit the robbery and murder. *—Salar News*

**HOMAGE TO HERITAGE**

Channapatna toy paintings adorn Yellow line metro pillars near Huskur station in Bengaluru. Channapatna has a rich history dating back to the time of Tipu Sultan, who invited Persians to train local craftspeople **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

## CM inaugurates 371-bed Jayadeva Hospital in Kalaburagi

**KALABURAGI, 22 DEC**

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah inaugurated a new 371-bed facility at the Jayadeva Hospital in Kalaburagi on Sunday, emphasising its significance for the healthcare system in the Kalyan Karnataka region. This area, located in the northern part of the state and previously known as the Hyderabad-Karnataka region, encompasses multiple districts, including Yadgir, Raichur, and Koppal.

During a press conference, CM Siddaramaiah highlighted that the establishment of the hospital aligns with the provisions of Article 371J, which was enacted following the efforts of Mallikarjuna Kharge, the Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah during the inauguration of new building of Jayadeva Hospital in Kalaburagi on Sunday **PHOTO: X**

The 2012 Constitutional amendment aims to foster development in Kalyan Karnataka by creating a dedicated board and ensuring funding allocations, alongside reservations in education and government roles for residents of the area. *—PTI*

**BALLARI TO HOST NEXT YEAR**

## *Sahitya Sammelana ends with pro-Kannada resolutions*

**MYSURU, 22 DEC**

The three-day 87th Akhila Bharata Kannada Sahitya Sammelana concluded on Sunday with the adoption of several pro-Kannada resolutions.

Patel Pandu, Honorary Treasurer of the Kannada Sahitya Parishat, presented five key resolutions urging the state government to implement the Kannada Language Comprehensive Development Act, 2022.

The resolutions called for the appointment of an elected president of the Kannada Sahitya Parishat as vice president on the committee for the Act's implementation.

The gathering also demanded the strengthening of state-run schools with necessary infrastructure, including libraries, playgrounds, and proper staffing. Immediate appointment of teachers to non-Kannada schools for Kannada subjects was also requested.

Additionally, the resolution urged the government to resolve legal disputes related to providing jobs to Kannadigas in both the private and public sectors, in line with the Sarojini Mahishi recommendations.

The Kannada Sahitya Parishat announced that Ballari would host the next edition of the literary festival, with official details to follow.

Union Minister HD Kumaraswamy, who participated in the valedictory ceremony, promised to initiate measures for the revival of Bhadravathi Iron and Steels in Shivamogga. *—Salar News*

The Kannada Sahitya Parishat announced that Ballari would host the next edition of the literary festival, with official details to follow **PHOTO: X**

## FARMERS URGED TO CREATE VALUE ADDED PRODUCTS

**MYSURU, 22 DEC**

Honnur Prakash, Chief of the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha and Hasiru Sene's Chamarajanagar district unit, on Sunday advised farmers to focus on developing value-added products and creating their own markets to improve profitability. He emphasized that these steps are crucial for farmers' financial success.

Prakash was speaking at the Farmers Day celebrations and the release of the 2025 annual calendar, organised by the Nadaprabhu Kempegowda Youth Brigade, Lions Club of Saraswathipuram, and other organisations, at the Shirvi Charitable Trust auditorium on KRS Road in the City.

He encouraged farmers to take control by finding their own markets. *—Salar News*

## 416 people held in child marriage crackdown: Himanta

**GUWAHATI, 22 DEC**

Four hundred and sixteen people have been arrested in the third phase of the crackdown against child marriage in Assam, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Sunday. The crackdown was launched on the night of 21-22 December, he said. The police have registered 335 cases and the arrested will be produced in court on Sunday. "In Phase 3 operations launched on the night of 21-22 Dec, 416 arrests were made and 335 cases registered. The arrested individuals will be produced in court. We will continue to take bold steps to end this social evil", he said. The government had launched a drive in two phases in February and October in 2023. In first phase 3,483 people were held and 4,515 cases registered arrested and 710 cases registered in the second phase. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

## Delhi court allows Karti to travel abroad

**NEW DELHI, 22 DEC**

A Delhi court has granted permission to Congress MP Karti Chidambaram, an accused in the INX Media case, to travel to Austria and the UK between 4 and 12 January, noting that he had never abused the liberty granted to him in the past. Karti, a company employee, has been granted permission by Special Judge Kaveri Baweja to travel to Vienna and the UK for company events and to meet his daughter. However, the ED opposed his application due to potential misuse. The CBI registered a case in 2017 alleging irregularities in a Foreign Investment Promotion Board clearance granted to INX Media group for overseas funding of Rs 305 crore in 2007 during the tenure of Union finance minister P Chidambaram, and senior Congress leader P Chidambaram. *—PTI*

## Rahul summoned over Economic Survey remarks

**BAREILLY, 22 DEC**

A court here has summoned Congress MP and Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi to appear before it on 7 January for his remarks related to the Economic Survey during the Lok Sabha polls. District and Sessions Judge Sudhir Kumar summoned Gandhi regarding a plea filed by Pankaj Pathak, Mandal president of the All India Hindu Mahasangh outfit. Pathak filed a case against Gandhi in August, but the court rejected the application. Pathak then filed a revision petition in the sessions court, leading to the current summons. Virendra Pal Gupta, representing Pathak, accused Gandhi of using statements during the Lok Sabha elections to provoke weaker sections and create class hatred for political gain, and he claimed that Gandhi deliberately sparked hostility among economically weaker sections. *—PTI*

## AIMIM man among 50 booked in protest against HM

**MUMBAI, 22 DEC**

A case has been registered against AIMIM leader Imtiyaz Jaleel and 49 others for staging a protest against Union Home Minister Amit Shah without permission in Maharashtra's Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, police said on Sunday. All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) leader Jaleel took part in the demonstration at Paithan Gate on Saturday to protest Shah's remarks in the Parliament about Dr BR Ambedkar, an official said. He said the protest was held without permission during a curfew. The official said a case has been registered under relevant sections of BNS) and no one has been arrested. *—PTI*

# Popcorn politics: Cong flags 'absurd' tax slabs on snack

### Cong asks if PM will show courage for GST overhaul

**NEW DELHI, 22 DEC**

Congress Sunday said the "absurdity" of three different tax slabs for popcorn under GST only brings to light the growing complexity of the system and asked whether the Modi government will show the courage to launch a complete overhaul for instituting a GST 2.0.

Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh also claimed GST evasion is significant, input tax credit fraud is common, and the number of bogus companies set up to "game" the GST system runs into thousands.

"The absurdity of three different tax slabs for popcorn under GST, which has unleashed a tsunami of memes on social media, only brings to light a deeper issue: the growing complexity of a system that was supposed to be a Good and Simple Tax," he said in a post on X.

Council on Saturday said that pre-packed ready-to-eat snacks will attract a 12% tax while an 18% GST will be levied if it is caramelised *PHOTO: PTI*

"GST evasion is significant, input tax credit fraud is common, and the number of bogus companies set up to 'game' the GST system runs into thousands. He said the data on tax frauds uncovered by the Directorate General of GST Intelligence reveal GST evasion of Rs 2.01 lakh crore in FY24. Council on Saturday agreed to issue a clarification on taxation of popcorn, saying that pre-packed and labelled ready-to-eat snacks will attract a 12 per cent tax while an 18 per cent GST will be levied if it is caramelised. There is no change in the tax rate of popcorn and the GST Council has only agreed that the

- 'Ready-to-eat popcorn', which is mixed with salt and spices, currently attracts a 5 per cent GST if it is not pre-packaged and labelled

Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) will issue a circular clarifying the current taxation regime of popcorn.

'Ready-to-eat popcorn', which is mixed with salt and spices, and has the essential character of namkeens currently attracts a 5 per cent GST if it is not pre-packaged and labelled. However, when popcorn is mixed with sugar (caramel popcorn), its essential character changes to that of a sugar confectionary, and would therefore be classifiable under HS 1704 90 90 and attract an 18 per cent GST, as per the clarification. *—PTI*

# Kharge calls out 'calibrated erosion' of EC's integrity

**NEW DELHI, 22 DEC**

Mallikarjun Kharge *PHOTO: PTI*

Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge has condemned the Indian government's recent amendment to election rules that restrict public inspection of certain electronic documents, branding it a "systematic conspiracy" to undermine the integrity of the Election Commission of India (ECI). Kharge asserted that this move represents a direct assault on both the Constitution and democracy.

The amendment, made on Friday by the Union law ministry based on ECI recommendations, alters Rule 93(2)(a) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, limiting public access to specific documents, including CCTV footage, webcasting recordings, and video footage of candidates as a measure to prevent misuse.

Kharge stated, "The Modi government's audacious amendment is another step towards destroying the institutional integrity of the ECI." He further claimed that the government had previously removed the Chief Justice of India from the selection panel for appointing Election Commissioners and is now

- Citing a lack of transparency regarding issues EVMs Kharge indicated that the ECI has responded dismissively to the Congress party's inquiries

obstructing access to electoral information, despite a High Court ruling.

Citing a lack of transparency regarding issues such as voter deletions and concerns over electronic voting machines (EVMs), Kharge indicated that the ECI has responded dismissively to the Congress party's inquiries. "This demonstrates that the ECI, while a quasi-judicial body, is not acting independently," he remarked. *—PTI*

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his Kuwaiti counterpart Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah in Kuwait on Sunday *PHOTO: PTI*

# India, Kuwait sign 4 MoUs to boost defence ties

**KUWAIT CITY, 22 DEC**

India and Kuwait signed four Memorandum of Understandings in the areas of defence, sports and cultural cooperation during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the Gulf nation, the Ministry of External Affairs said on Sunday.

MEA Secretary CPV and OIA, Arun Kumar Chatterjee during a special briefing today, said the MoUs are expected to deepen the multi-faceted bilateral relationship as well as open avenues for newer areas of cooperation.

"Following the delegation level talks today, four bilateral documents were signed during the visit. The first one is a Memorandum of Understanding on defence cooperation, the second one is a Cultural Exchange program for the years 2025-2029, the third is an executive program on cooperation in the field of sports for the period 2025- 2028. We also had Kuwait joining as a member of the International Solar Alliance (ISA)," he said.

He said that Kuwaiti side acknowledged the important contribution made by Indians there in their economy. Both sides agreed that working groups in the sectors of health and education will identify new sectors of cooperation.

"Health and pharmaceuticals is one important area which both the sides have identified for cooperation and that could include investments by the Kuwaiti side in India or expansion of the trade basket to increase pharmaceutical exports also from India", Chatterjee said. *—PTI*

# RaGa, Priyanka poll victory remarks spark CPI(M) row

**T'PURAM, 22 DEC**

CPI (M) Politburo member A Vijayaraghavan's recent controversial remarks regarding the Lok Sabha victories of Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra from the Wayanad constituency have drawn sharp criticism from Congress and Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) leaders on Sunday.

Congress leaders accused the senior CPI (M) leader of making the comments to "please" the Sangh Parivar, while their United Democratic Front (UDF) ally, the IUML, alleged that he was attempting to provoke majority communalism in society.

During a party event in Wayanad on Saturday, Vijayaraghavan reportedly

Vijayaraghavan *PHOTO: PTI*

claimed that Rahul Gandhi secured victory in the high-range segment twice with the support of communal forces and that extremist elements were present at Priyanka Gandhi's campaign rallies.

AICC General Secretary KC Venugopal criticised Vijayaraghavan, accusing him of using "communal" language that even the Sangh Parivar might hesitate to employ against Gandhi.

"How can someone holding the position of a Politburo member of the CPI (M) speak in such a communal manner? This is part of a deal to please the BJP. This is not just a CPI (M) statement—it is a BJP quotation aimed at crucifying Rahul Gandhi," Venugopal alleged.

Leader of Opposition VD Satheesan echoed similar sentiments, charging the CPI (M) with pushing the same communal agenda propagated by the Sangh Parivar. "Post-Parliamentary elections, the CPI (M) is engaged in majority appeasement. This is an effort to gain favour and escape scrutiny from central agencies," Satheesan said. *—PTI*

## RaGa to visit Parbhani; BJP calls it 'drama'

**MUMBAI, 22 DEC**

Rahul Gandhi, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, is set to visit Parbhani city in Maharashtra on Monday to meet with the families of two individuals who died following violence earlier this month. The visit has drawn criticism from the state BJP, who have described it as a "drama."

The unrest erupted after a glass-enclosed replica of the Constitution, situated near Dr Ambedkar's statue outside the railway station, was vandalised on 10 December. According to Congress leader Vijay Wadettiwar, Gandhi will meet the families of Somnath Suryavanshi, who died in custody, and Vijay Wakode, who lost his life during the protests. *—PTI*

## Pawar, Fadnavis discuss Parbhani, Beed violence

**PUNE, 22 DEC**

NCP (SP) president Sharad Pawar on Sunday had a telephonic conversation with Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis about the murder of a sarpanch in Beed and the custodial death of a man following violence in Parbhani.

Pawar, who was in Pune on Sunday to attended the Bhimthadi Jatra at the College of Agriculture in the city, called the chief minister, urging him to take note of the Beed and Parbhani cases.

The NCP (SP) chief on Saturday visited the families of Santosh Deshmukh, the slain sarpanch, and Somnath Suryawanshi, who allegedly died in judicial custody after his arrest in connection with the violence in Parbhani.

Fadnavis announced judicial probes into the Parbhani violence and the sarpanch's murder and financial assistance of Rs 10 lakh each to the kin of Deshmukh and Suryawanshi. "I had a word with the chief minister…I have told him that the situation was serious and asked him to take note of the issue," Pawar said on Sunday.

Protests turned violent last week when a replica of the Constitution was vandalised and Suryavanshi was arrested in this connection. *—PTI*

## AAP WINS PATIALA IN CIVIC POLLS, LEADS IN LUDHIANA, JALANDHAR

**CHANDIGARH, 22 DEC**

AAP has achieved a significant victory in Patiala's municipal elections, securing 43 out of 53 wards. However, the party fell short of a majority in Ludhiana and Jalandhar, emerging as the largest party in both cities but unable to form a government.

The elections for Ludhiana, Jalandhar, Patiala, Amritsar, and Phagwara—along with 44 municipal councils and nagar panchayats in Punjab, took place on Saturday. In Patiala, which is a stronghold of former Chief Minister Amarinder Singh, the Congress and BJP obtained four wards each, while the Shiromani Akali Dal won two. *—PTI*

## ONOE bills may not sail through Parl: Digvijaya

**AGAR MALWA, 22 DEC**

Congress Rajya Sabha member Digvijaya Singh has said he is doubtful that the One Nation, One Election (ONOE) bills will be passed in Parliament.

The two ONOE bills, including one requiring an amendment in the Constitution, were introduced in the Lok Sabha on Tuesday after a fiery debate. The House on Friday referred the bills to a joint Parliamentary committee (JPC).

To a question on the ONOE bills, Digvijaya Singh said, "A JPC has been constituted, and I don't think that it will be passed."

Talking to reporters in Madhya Pradesh's Agar Malwa district on Saturday, Singh also denied allegations

*PHOTO: ANI*

against Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi of "pushing and shoving" BJP MPs on Parliament premises on Thursday.

On Thursday, the NJP filed an FIR against Rahul Gandhi at Parliament Street police station, accusing him of physical assault and incitement after MPs Pratap Chandra Sarangi and Mukesh Rajput were injured. *—PTI*

## Will SC reopen Pegasus case, asks Surjewala

**NEW DELHI, 22 DEC**

Congress general secretary **Randeep Surjewala** on Sunday claimed that the Pegasus spyware case verdict in the US proved how 300 WhatsApp numbers of Indians were targeted and asked if the Supreme Court would now conduct a further inquiry in view of the judgment. He shared a report which said that, for the first time, a court in the US had held Israel's NSO Group liable for its intrusive spyware Pegasus.

"The Pegasus spyware case verdict proves how 300 WhatsApp numbers of Indians were targeted in the illegal spyware racket," he said on X. He said it was time for the Narendra Modi government to answer who the 300 names targeted were. "Who are the two Union ministers? Who are the three opposition leaders? Who is the constitutional authority? Who are the journalists? Who are the business persons? What information was retrieved by the BJP government and agencies? How was it used – misused – and to what consequence?" he asked. *—PTI*

'NO SENSE OF REVULSION'

# *Dhankhar calls for accountability of MPs*

**NEW DELHI, 22 DEC**

Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar on Sunday called for accountability of lawmakers and said people would force them to think why they were sent to Parliament.

He also said that for any democracy to succeed, expression and dialogue must go hand in hand with great responsibility on both sides.

Dhankhar is the Rajya Sabha's ex-officio chairman.

Calling for accountability among parliamentarians, he said, "... Make no mistake, I am referring to parliamentarians. People have learned to take disorder as order. There is no sense of revulsion."

- He also said that for any democracy to succeed, expression and dialogue must go hand in hand with great responsibility

Hopefully, people will write and their thoughts will move, the vice-president said, according to an official statement.

The vice-president of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee has emphasised the importance of agriculture in rural development and the need for an eightfold increase in people's income to achieve a developed nation by 2047. He also highlighted the need for strengthening the village economy, stating that the greatest market for agricultural produce is yet to be fully utilised by farming communities.

*PHOTO: PTI*

The Chaudhary Charan Singh Awards - 2024 were presented for contributions to agriculture, rural development, and journalism, with the event attended by Union ministers Dharmendra Prradhan and Jayant Chaudhary. Union minister Chaudhary praised Charan Singh's legacy and said the current policies of the Narendra Modi government reflect his vision, including procurement prices, debt relief for farmers, land reforms, and the uplift of landless people.

The event was attended by Union ministers Dharmendra Prradhan and Jayant Chaudhary. *—PTI*

## Yogi boasts of peace in UP, SP claims 'jungle raj'

**LUCKNOW, 22 DEC**

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Sunday said the law and order situation in Uttar Pradesh has improved and as a result, the state has received investment proposals worth Rs 40 lakh crore.

In a post on X, the Chief Minister's Office shared a video in which Adityanath is heard saying that there is a better security environment in the state and people have faith in law and order. "It is the result of this that Uttar Pradesh has received investment proposals of Rs 40 lakh crore," he said.

Within two hours of this post, opposition Samajwadi Party's Media Cell shared on X clippings of news reports about a murder and a dacoity in Varanasi and Chitrakoot, respectively. "This is Chief Minister Yogi's shameful and ruined law and order which he boasts about from packed stages," it read.

"In Yogiraj, there is an atmosphere of jungle raj with loot, hooliganism, anarchy, and murder and kidnapping everywhere," the SP said in its post.

"In Chief Minister Yogi's rule, there is collusion between police, BJP and robbers and the looted goods are distributed among all... CM Yogi should tell if he is the CEO of this gang of robbers or the trainer," it said. *—PTI*

PHOTO: ANI

## Delhi's AQI remains 'very poor' at 388

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

The Air Quality Index (AQI) in the national capital remained in the 'very poor' category on Sunday, with a thin layer of fog covering parts of the city and limiting visibility. According to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), the AQI was 388 at 7 am on Sunday in the national capital. On Saturday, the AQI in Delhi was recorded at 398, as per the CPCB. The Air Quality Index in several areas of the national capital was recorded as 'very poor.' The AQI was recorded 384 at ITO, 372 at Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, DTU 354, IGI Airport (T3) 372, DU North Campus 381, at 7 am on Sunday. However, the AQI in several areas remained in the 'severe' category with 411 at Alipur, 427 at Anand Vihar, and 408 at RK Puram.—*ANI*

## Bullion trader, son shot at; jewellery bag stolen in UP

VARANASI, 22 DEC

Car-borne unidentified assailants shot at a bullion trader and his son, and looted a bag full of jewellery from them in the Kamchha area here in the early hours of Sunday, police said. Both the victims have been hospitalised and are out of danger, they said. Around 3:30 am, bullion trader Deepak Soni, 46, a resident of Gurudham Colony here, returned to Varanasi from Mumbai with the bag containing jewellery. He was returning home from Varanasi railway station on a scooter with his son when a car overtook them and its occupants opened fire at the Soni and his son, said Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP), Kashi Zone, Gaurav Bansal. Both Soni and his son were injured in the firing while the assailants fled with the bag containing the jewellery. —*PTI*

## Ensure presence of accused in court: SC

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

The Supreme Court has asked the Bombay High Court and the Maharashtra government to evolve a mechanism to ensure that accused are produced before trial judges either physically or virtually on every date so that the trial is not prolonged. A bench of Justices BR Gavai and KV Viswanathan, while dealing with an appeal challenging the Bombay High Court order denying bail to an accused, said, "We, therefore, direct the registrar general of the high court of judicature at Bombay, secretary to sit together and evolve a mechanism to ensure that accused are produced before the trial judge either physically or virtually on every date and the trial is not permitted to be prolonged on the ground of non-production." —*ANI*

## NCB busts international drug racket; 4 held

AHMEDABAD, 22 DEC

Narcotics Control Bureau Ahmedabad has busted an international drug syndicate with the seizure of two kg ketamine and arrested four persons, including three Nigerian nationals, the NCB said on Sunday. The accused conspired to traffic ketamine from India to foreign countries through courier parcels, the NCB said in a release, detailing the significant crackdown of the organised drug crime operating from the Indian soil. The value of the seized contraband was not specified. Ketamine is a highly valued and sought after contraband in USA and also used as a "date rape" drug, the release said. While being in India, the accused was booked in another case under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act by the NCB Mumbai last year and was currently out on parole, it said. —*PTI*

# Mohali building collapse: Death toll climbs to two

### Army, NDRF end rescue ops on day 2, probe ordered

CHANDIGARH, 22 DEC

Rescue operation continues after a multi-storey building collapsed on Saturday evening, at Sohana village in Punjab's Mohali district, on Sunday PHOTO: PTI

The death toll in the Mohali building collapse climbed to two with the body of a 29-year-old man recovered from under the rubble on Sunday, even as a preliminary probe suggested that digging in an adjacent plot led to the incident.

The multi-storey building collapsed on Saturday evening in Sohana village of Punjab's Mohali district, with at least five people trapped under its rubble. Rescue efforts continued overnight to find possible survivors.

Sub-Divisional Magistrate, Mohali, Damandeep Kaur said one male body was recovered during the ongoing rescue operation.

He was identified as Abhishek Dhanwal from Ambala.

Earlier in the day, Abhishek's father told reporters at the site that his son, who used to visit a gym in the building, was missing and his phone was not reachable.

Abhishek worked in the IT sector and used to live in a nearby area, his father said.

Earlier, a 20-year-old woman died in the incident on Saturday evening.The woman hailing from Himachal Pradesh, died after she was pulled out of the debris of the building. She was rescued from the rubble in a critical condition and was rushed to a hospital, but she succumbed to injuries.

Police have booked two building owners in the incident. —*PTI*

IN A TWIST

PHOTO: PTI

# Delhi students sent bomb threats to delay exams

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

Delhi Police on Sunday said that bomb threat emails sent to two schools in Rohini were sent by their own students.

According to the police, both students sent threat emails as they wanted to postpone their exams because they were unprepared.

"After investigation by the Special Cell of Delhi Police, it was found that the emails were sent to both schools by two different students of the same school. Both students had sent this email to stop the exam because they were not prepared for the exam paper," Delhi Police said.

"Since both of them were students, they were counselled and then let off," Delhi Police added.

On 14 December, Delhi Police Special Cell identified a student of a private school as having sent a bomb threat email to the Paschim Vihar school.

According to police, the student had sent the threat email to his school, and after tracing the IP address, the police team traced his home. Upon questioning, child admitted to the act and was later counselled. He was let off with a warning to his parents to keep a watch on his behaviour. —*ANI*

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, centre, walks at the Christmas Market, where a car drove into a crowd in Magdeburg, Germany PHOTO: PTI

# 7 Indians injured in German mkt attack

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

Seven Indians have been injured in a deadly attack in the eastern German city of Magdeburg and the Indian embassy in Berlin is providing them all possible assistance, sources said on Saturday night.

A 50-year-old man drove his car into the crowd at a Christmas market on Friday evening in Saxony-Anhalt state's Magdeburg, leaving at least five people, including a nine-year-old, dead and nearly 200 injured, according to German authorities.

Three out of seven injured Indians have been discharged from hospital, the Indian government sources said.

Condemning the "horrific and senseless" attack, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said the Indian mission in Germany is in contact with the Indians injured. It, however, did not specify the number of Indians injured.

In a post on X, the Indian embassy in Berlin said it is maintaining close contact with the Indians injured in the attack.

The MEA said the Indian mission is rendering all possible assistance to the Indians injured in the incident. —*PTI*

# 150-yr-old stepwell found in Sambhal

SAMBHAL, 22 DEC

A stepwell, approximately 125 to 150 years old and covering an area of 400 square metres, was unearthed during excavation in the Laxman Ganj area of Chandausi here, an official said.

Excavation at the site began on Saturday, said Krishna Kumar Sonkar, the Executive Officer of Chandausi Nagar Palika.

The excavation follows the reopening of the Bhasma Shankar temple in Sambhal on 13 December, after being closed for 46 years. Authorities said they discovered the structure during an anti-encroachment drive.

Two damaged idols were found inside the well sof the temple, officials had said.

According to local sources, the stepwell was constructed during the reign of the maternal grandfather of the king of Bilari.

Sambhal District Magistrate Rajender Pensiya said the possibility of a survey by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) at the site is being considered, and a request may be submitted to ASI if necessary.

Workers during excavation work at a site at Chandausi, Sambhal PHOTO: PTI

- The DM said that the temple, believed to be about 150 years old, houses two idols that are safely kept in separate temples

Speaking to the media, Pensiya confirmed that the site was previously registered as a pond. The well's upper floor is made of bricks, while the second and third floors are of marble. The structure also features four rooms and a well, he said.

The officer also addressed concerns about the Banke Bihari temple, located nearby the stepwell, which has fallen into disrepair.

The DM said that the temple, believed to be about 150 years old, houses two idols that are safely kept in separate temples. He assured that steps will be taken to renovate the temple, and any encroachments around it will be removed. —*PTI*

## Tripura: 37,500 Bru tribal refugees rehabilitated

AMBASSA, 22 DEC

Over 37,500 Bru tribals, who were affected by the ethnic violence in Mizoram in the late 1990s and 2009, have been rehabilitated in Tripura at a cost of Rs 821 crore provided by the Union Home Ministry, officials said here.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday visited some of these refugees in Tripura.

On 16 January, 2020, a quadripartite agreement was signed among the governments of India, Tripura, Mizoram and representatives of Bru organisations for the permanent rehabilitation of Bru migrants in Tripura, officials said.

While about 70 per cent of the Bru (Reang) tribals are Hindu, the remaining are Christians.

Bru migrants from three districts of Mizoram -- Mamit, Lunglei and Kolasib districts-- moved to the North Tripura district in 1997, 1998 and 2009 due to serious ethnic violence in Mizoram between Bru and Mizo communities. —*PTI*

# WB, Bihar most affected by arsenic contamination: Centre to NGT

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

West Bengal and Bihar are impacted the most by arsenic contamination of groundwater, the Centre has informed the National Green Tribunal (NGT).

The tribunal is hearing the issue of rice being susceptible to arsenic contamination because it absorbs more of the toxic semi-metallic element from water and soil. Earlier, it sought a reply from the Centre on it.

"States of West Bengal and Bihar are reported to be most affected by arsenic contamination of groundwater irrigation by contaminated groundwater is the major route for arsenic entry into agricultural soil which ultimately leads to its entry into the food chain," the Centre said in its reply.

There can be a "significant build-up" of the toxic element in rice as it is a water-intensive crop, the reply stated.

The tribunal noted that, according to the reply, the distribution of arsenic content in plant parts generally followed the order of roots, stems and leaves.

The reply also suggested various remedial measures to minimise the effect of arsenic in the soil-plant system.

The tribunal then impleaded the ICAR as a respondent and sought its response. It will hear the matter next on 15 April. —*PTI*

## Farmers' protest at Khanauri enters 314th day

SANGRUR, 22 DEC

The protest organised by the Punjab farmers at the Khanauri border in Sangrur district, near the Haryana border, entered its 314th day on Sunday. They have been protesting to press various demands, including a law to guarantee the minimum support price (MSP).

Farm leader Sarwan Singh Pandher earlier appealed to the residents of both states to reach the Khanauri and Shambhu border in large numbers to support them.

The Supreme Court on Friday said that it is Punjab authorities' responsibility to ensure health condition of Dallewal is stable. —*ANI*

## Freezing Kashmir turns to traditional heat sources

SRINAGAR, 22 DEC

The residents of Kashmir are going back to traditional ways of coping with the intense cold wave conditions as frequent and unscheduled power cuts have rendered modern heating gadgets useless.

Kashmir is witnessing Chilla-i-Kalan, the 40-day harshest winter period. Srinagar city witnessed the coldest night in 33 years as the minimum temperature dipped to bone-chilling minus 8.5°C on Saturday.

Over the past couple of decades, residents of urban Kashmir had done away with traditional heating arrangements – wood-based hamams, bukharis and wicker-clay pot kangri – as electricity supply had started improving year on year.

However, as Kashmir is going through one of the harshest winters in recent memory, electricity in most parts of Kashmir at best is erratic, rendering electric gadgets useless.

Meanwhile, cold wave conditions also prevailed in parts of Rajasthan on Sunday, with Karauli recording the lowest minimum temperature at 4.5 degrees Celsius. Sangaria and Fatehpur also recorded minimum of 5.3°C and 5.4°C, respectively. —*PTI*

FROM REEL TO REAL

# *Drug smuggler arrested in Nagpur theatre during 'Pushpa 2' show*

NAGPUR, 22 DEC

PHOTO: X

Moviegoers watching a late-night show of "Pushpa 2" at a multiplex in Maharashtra's Nagpur witnessed a real-life action scene as police stormed the cinema hall and arrested a man wanted in murder and drug cases.

The dramatic arrest of Vishal Meshram shortly after midnight on Thursday left the packed audience stunned, but police assured them that they could continue enjoying the movie as they nabbed the accused and took him away.

Meshram was on the run for 10 months and was eventually tracked down after police learnt about his interest in the recently-released film, an official from Pachpaoli police station said on Sunday.

The gangster had 27 cases against him, including two of murder and drug trafficking, and was known for his violent tendencies, even attacking police in the past, he said.

Authorities had been pursuing him relentlessly, using cyber surveillance and tracking his movements in a new sports utility vehicle (SUV), the official said.

After tracking him on Thursday, police deflated the vehicle's tyres outside the cinema hall, located in central part of the city, to prevent his escape, he said.

When police personnel entered the hall during the movie's climax, Meshram was engrossed in the film.

Meshram is currently lodged in the Nagpur Central Jail and will soon be transferred to a prison in Nashik, the police said. —*PTI*

# Always together in love: Zakir Hussain's family in first post

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

The undated black-and-white picture shows the hands of Hussain, his wife Antonia Minnecola, daughters Anisa Qureshi and Isabella Qureshi held tightly together PHOTO: INSTAGRAM

Days after Zakir Hussain was laid to rest at a San Francisco cemetery, the family of the tabla maestro shared a moving post on his official Instagram account on Sunday.

It marks the first post on the social media page of Hussain since his death at a San Francisco hospital early last week due to complications arising from idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, a lung disease. He was 73.

The undated black-and-white picture shows the hands of Hussain, his wife Antonia Minnecola, daughters Anisa Qureshi and Isabella Qureshi held tightly together.

"Always together in love," read the caption of the post, tagging the four members of Hussain's kin.

The post has since received over 21,000 likes, around 1,000 comments, and more than 300 shares on Instagram.

Hussain's followers, including his Shakti bandmate Shankar Mahadevan, musicians Karsh Kale, Ankur Tewari, Hariharan and Pakistani artiste Ali Sethi, liked the post.

The celebrated musician, one of India's most well-known, received four Grammy Awards in his career spanning six decades, including three at 66th Grammy Awards earlier this year. —*PTI*

**TRIBUTE TO KARGIL INFORMANT**

The Army paid tribute to Tashi Namgyal, the Ladakhi shepherd who alerted Indian troops to Pakistan's 1999 Kargil intrusion, on Sunday. Namgyal's warning led to swift mobilisation, thwarting Pakistan's covert mission. died at age 58.
***PHOTO: PTI***

# Those who shared Assad's kin's fortune cling to hope

On the walls of the palatial mausoleum built to house the remains of former Syrian President Hafez Assad, vandals have sprayed variations of the phrase, "Damn your soul, Hafez."

Nearly two weeks after the ouster of his son, Bashar Assad, people streamed in to take photos next to the burned-out hollow where the elder Assad's grave used to be. It was torched by rebel fighters after a lightning offensive overthrew Assad's government, bringing more than a half-century rule by the Assad dynasty to an end.

The mausoleum's sprawling grounds — and the surrounding area, where the ousted president and other relatives had villas — were until recently off limits to residents of Qardaha, the former presidential dynasty's hometown in the mountains overlooking the coastal city of Latakia.

Nearby, Bashar Assad's house was emptied by looters, who left the water taps running to flood it. At a villa belonging to three of his cousins, a father and his two young sons were removing pipes to sell the scrap metal. A gutted piano was tipped over on the floor.

While the Assads lived in luxury, most Qardaha residents — many, like Assad, members of the Alawite minority sect — survived on manual labour, low-level civil service jobs and farming to eke out a living. Many sent their sons to serve in the army, not out of loyalty to the government but because they had no other option.

In the city's main street, a modest strip of small grocery stores and clothing shops, Ali Youssef, stood next to a coffee cart, gesturing with disdain. "This street is the best market and the best street in Qardaha and it's full of potholes."

Families resorted to eating bread dipped in oil and salt because they could not afford meat or vegetables, he said. Youssef said he dodged mandatory military service for two years, but eventually was forced to go.

Nearly two weeks after the ouster of his son, Bashar Assad, people streamed in to take photos next to the burned-out hollow where the elder Assad's grave used to be
***PHOTO: AP***

"Our salary was 300,000 Syrian pounds," a month, he said — just over USD 20. "We used to send it to our families to pay the rent or live and eat with it" while working jobs on the side to cover their own expenses.

So far, residents said, the security forces made up of fighters from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham — the main group in the coalition that unseated Assad, and which is now ruling the country — have been respectful toward them.

Al-Ali called Assad a "traitor," but she remained circumspect about her Alawite community's position in the new Syria.

"The most important thing is that there should be no sectarianism, so there will be no more blood spilled," she said.

Dayoub, the Alawite sheikh, described "a state of anticipation and caution among all citizens in this area, and in general among Alawites," although he said fears have started to ease.

At the town's municipal building, dozens of notables sat on bleachers discussing the country's new reality and what they hoped to convey to the new leadership.

Much was centred around economic woes — retired public servants' salaries had not been paid, the price of fuel had risen, there was no public transportation in the area.

But others had larger concerns.

"We hope that in the next government or the new Syria, we will have rights and duties like any Syrian citizen — we are not asking for any more or less," said Jaafar Ahmed, a doctoral student and community activist. "We don't accept the curtailment of our rights because the regime was part of this component."

Questions also loomed about the fate of the area's sons who had served in Assad's army.

Since the army's collapse in the face of the rebel advance, residents said several thousand young army recruits from Qardaha have gone missing. Some later turned up on lists of former soldiers being held at a detention centre in Hama.

"These are young guys who are 22 or 23 and they never took part" in active combat, said Qais Ibrahim, whose nephews were among the missing. Over the past few years, active combat was largely frozen in the country's civil war. "We send our children to the army because we don't have any other source of income."

Um Jaafar, who gave only her nickname out of fear of reprisals, said the family had no information about the fate of her two sons, stationed with the army in Raqqa and Deir Ezzour, though one son's name later turned up on the list of those imprisoned in Hama.

Syria's new authorities have set up "reconciliation centres" around the country where former soldiers can register, hand over their weapons and receive a "reconciliation ID" allowing them to move freely and safely in Syria for three months.

But Ahmed, the doctoral student, said he wants more. As the country attempts to unify and move on after nearly 14 years of civil war, he said, "We want either forgiveness for all or accountability for all."

Ahmed acknowledged that during the war, "rural Latakia was responsible for some radical groups," referring to pro-Assad militias accused of widespread abuses against civilians. But, he said, opposition groups also committed abuses.

Rebels often indiscriminately targeted Alawites because they were seen as the firmest pillar of Assad's rule — and some Islamist extremists among the rebels consider them heretics.

"We can't talk about holding accountable one ... group but not another." —*PTI*

# SALAR

## Gaza: Winter deepens crisis for struggling Palestinians

The Winter is hitting the Gaza Strip and many of the nearly 2 million Palestinians displaced by the devastating 14-month war with Israel are struggling to protect themselves from the wind, cold and rain.

There is a shortage of blankets and warm clothing, little wood for fires, and the tents and patched-together tarps families are living in have grown increasingly threadbare after months of heavy use, according to aid workers and residents.

Shadia Aiyada, who was displaced from the southern city of Rafah to the coastal area of Muwasi, has only one blanket and a hot water bottle to keep her eight children from shivering inside their fragile tent.

"We get scared every time we learn from the weather forecast that rainy and windy days are coming up because our tents are lifted with the wind. We fear that strong windy weather would knock out our tents one day while we're inside," she said.

With nighttime temperatures that can drop into the 40s (the mid-to-high single digits Celsius), Aiyada fears that her kids will get sick without warm clothing.

When they fled their home, her children only had their summer clothes, she said. They have been forced to borrow some from relatives and friends to keep warm.

The United Nations warns of people living in precarious makeshift shelters that might not survive the winter.

At least 945,000 people need winterisation supplies, which have become prohibitively expensive in Gaza, the UN said in an update Tuesday. The UN also fears infectious disease, which spiked last winter, will climb again amid rising malnutrition.

The U.N. Agency for Palestinian Refugees, known as UNRWA, has been planning all year for winter in Gaza, but the aid it was able to get into the territory is "not even close to being enough for people," said Louise Wateridge, an agency spokeswoman.

UNRWA distributed 6,000 tents over the past four weeks in northern Gaza but was unable to get them to other parts of the Strip, including areas where there has been fighting.

About 22,000 tents have been stuck in Jordan and 600,000 blankets and 33 truckloads of mattresses have been sitting in Egypt since the summer because the agency doesn't have Israeli approval or a safe route to bring them into Gaza and because it had to prioritise desperately needed food aid, Wateridge said.

Many of the mattresses and blankets have since been looted or destroyed by the weather and rodents, she said.

The International Rescue Committee is struggling to bring in children's winter clothing because there "are a lot of approvals to get from relevant authorities," said Dionne Wong, the organisation's deputy director of programs for the occupied Palestinian territories.

More than 45,000 Palestinians have been killed in the war in Gaza, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. The ministry's count doesn't distinguish between civilians and combatants, but it has said more than half of the fatalities are women and children. The Israeli military says it has killed more than 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

The war was sparked by Hamas' October 2023 attack on southern Israel, where the militant group killed 1,200 people and took 250 hostages in Gaza.

Negotiators say Israel and Hamas are inching toward a ceasefire deal, which would include a surge in aid into the territory.

For now, the winter clothing for sale in Gaza's markets is far too expensive for most people to afford, residents and aid workers said.

Reda Abu Zarada, 50, who was displaced from northern Gaza with her family, said the adults sleep with the children in their arms to keep them warm inside their tent.

On Thursday night, she fought through knee pain exacerbated by cold weather to fry zucchini over a fire made of paper and cardboard scraps outside their tent. She hoped the small meal would warm the children before bed.

Omar Shabet, who is displaced from Gaza City and staying with his three children, feared that lighting a fire outside his tent would make his family a target for Israeli warplanes.

"We go inside our tents after sunset and don't go out because it is very cold and it gets colder by midnight," he said". —*PTI*

At least 945,000 people need winterisation supplies, which have become prohibitively expensive in Gaza, the UN said
***PHOTO: AP***

**LETTERS** write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

# *2024 saw Sunak out, Starmer in & renewed push for India-UK trade pact*

The year earmarked for general elections in both India and the UK was destined to throw up many new scenarios on the political front. Among them was a decision to relaunch a "mutually beneficial" Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the two countries.

Just as India's mammoth democratic exercise edged towards its phased conclusion in 2024, Britain's first Indian-origin prime minister Rishi Sunak surprised many within his own Conservative Party by calling an earlier-than-expected election on 4 July – exactly a month on from a third term win for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's National Democratic Alliance.

This meant the FTA talks, having entered their 14th round of intense negotiations, slipped into a more uncertain phase until the new Labour Party-led government committed itself to "deepening our bilateral ties".

It mapped out a clearly defined landscape for the future of the India-UK trade ties, which official UK government statistics clock at GBP 42 billion a year in the 12 months to June 2024.

Sunak may not have succeeded in getting the FTA over the line, but, as he admitted in his resignation speech at the doorstep of 10 Downing Street, British voters had given a "clear signal" in favour of change.

The 44-year-old leaves behind quite the legacy despite presiding over the Conservatives' worst electoral performance in history. His words that "one of the most remarkable things" about modern Britain is just how "unremarkable" his migrant roots were to the top job will resonate with many, not least a 1.8-million-strong Indian diaspora.

Having resigned after the bruising election defeat, Sunak served as interim Opposition leader before handing over the reins to Kemi Badenoch as the new Tory leader.

A fellow British Indian leadership hopeful, Priti Patel, soon returned to the front-benches of Parliament as shadow foreign secretary in a House of Commons with a record of nearly 30 parliamentarians of Indian heritage – including Lisa Nandy as Culture Secretary and Seema Malhotra as immigration minister.

Under Malhotra, the UK introduced measures to curb rising migration, including giving an independent body more power to reduce reliance on foreign labour and expedite the return of illegal immigrants.

Britain's first Indian-origin ex-prime minister Rishi Sunak and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer
***PHOTOS: PTI***

She has a tough task ahead of digitising the entire UK visas and immigration system, the deadline for which has been extended until March 2025.

Indian students and professionals are among those impacted, even as their numbers began registering a steady decline this year with the previous government's clamp down on accompanying spouses and hiked minimum salary cut-offs.

A simmering anti-immigration sentiment was behind a flurry of riots triggered by misinformation around the Welsh-born suspect behind a fatal stabbing of three schoolgirls in Southport, north-west England, at the end of July.

While anti-racism activists turned out for large counter-protests, the issue of migration will continue to dominate the news agenda in the new year even as businesses struggle to meet skills requirements across different sectors.

It was against this backdrop that the BT Group, back in August, welcomed Bharti Global's acquisition of a significant stake in the British telecom major as a "great vote of confidence". Chairman Sunil Bharti Mittal described the investment in an "iconic" British company as a "significant milestone" for Bharti Enterprises.

Another Indian multinational, Tata Steel, also hit a major milestone as it shut down its furnaces at the UK's largest steelworks in Port Talbot, Wales, to transition towards greener steelmaking.

It came just before Tata Group icon Ratan Tata, behind setting the course for several cross-sector India-UK tie-ups, breathed his last in Mumbai on October 9. Business and Trade Secretary Jonathan Reynolds led the tributes in the UK to "truly a titan of the business world and someone who played a huge role in shaping British industry".

The two-way flows were reflective across different areas beyond business and trade, especially over Diwali – celebrated widely across UK government corridors.

Starmer followed in the footsteps of his Hindu predecessor to light diyas on the doorstep of Downing Street but courted controversy when meat and alcohol were served during the festivity.

The apology came just before Starmer met with Modi, who also raised the issue of long-pending extradition requests – including fugitive diamond merchant Nirav Modi, who remains behind bars at Thameside, south-east London, after another failed bail attempt in May this year.

Sanjay Bhandari, a consultant in the defence sector wanted in India on alleged tax evasion and money laundering charges, won a High Court appeal against his extradition order which is to conclude in the new year.

Also expected in 2025 is King Charles III's return to Bengaluru for a wellness retreat where the 76-year-old monarch and wife Camilla made a private stopover in October on their way back from the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Samoa.

It came at the close of a tough year for the royals with Charles and his daughter-in-law, Kate Middleton, revealing their cancer diagnosis earlier. However, they are both back on official duties following their treatment and looking ahead to a packed schedule in the new year.

As 2024 comes to a close with both nations reaffirming their commitment to deepening trade, business, and cultural ties, 2025 holds promise for a stronger partnership and new opportunities on the global stage. —*PTI*

PHOTO: X

## Int'l court rules against El Salvador in abortion case

**SAN SALVADOR, 22 DEC**

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled against El Salvador for denying a woman, known as "Beatriz," an abortion, even though her life was at risk and the foetus was unviable. The court ordered El Salvador to compensate Beatriz's family, establish clear guidelines for medical and judicial personnel, and implement legal reforms to ensure clarity in handling similar cases. The case dates back to 2013, when Beatriz was denied an abortion due to El Salvador's total ban, which applies even in cases where the woman's life is in danger or the pregnancy results from rape. The Costa Rica-based court held El Salvador accountable for "obstetric violence and violation of the right to health" in Beatriz's case. ***—Agencies***

## Turkey: 4 killed as chopper crashes into hospital building

**MUGLA, 22 DEC**

An ambulance helicopter crashed on Sunday morning in south-western Turkey, killing all four people on board. Two pilots, one doctor and one health care worker were taking off from the city of Mugla on their way to pick up a patient in the neighbouring province of Antalya. The helicopter hit the hospital building from where it was taking off and crashed into a nearby field. Mugla Gov Idris Akbiyik noted that there was heavy fog at the time of take-off and that authorities were investigating the incident.***—PTI***

## Man beheads 1-year-old son in California; arrested

**SACRAMENTO, 22 DEC**

A man has been arrested on suspicion of beheading his 1-year-old son, Northern California authorities said. The Sacramento County Sheriff's Office said in a statement Friday that deputies responding to an early morning family disturbance call found a woman outside a home who told deputies that her husband Andrey Demskiy, 28, assaulted her and her mother. Deputies forced their way into the house in northern Sacramento County when they learned Demskiy was inside with the boy. As they took him into custody, they found a "severed child's head" in the bedroom where Demskiy was detained. Detectives said Demskiy used a knife to behead his son after his wife and mother-in-law left the house. He was in custody and ineligible for bail, and was scheduled to appear in court on Tuesday. ***—PTI***

## Albania to ban TikTok for a year citing violence

**TIRANA, 22 DEC**

Albania's Prime Minister announced on December 22 that the government will impose a one-year ban on TikTok, citing concerns over violence and bullying, particularly among children. The decision follows the tragic stabbing death of a teenager in mid-November, which allegedly stemmed from a dispute initiated on the platform. Prime Minister Edi Rama revealed that authorities have conducted over 1,300 meetings with parents and teachers in response to the incident and stated, "There will be no TikTok in the Republic of Albania". TikTok called for "urgent clarity" from the Albanian government, claiming it found no evidence linking the case to their platform. ***—PTI***

# 2 US Navy pilots shot down over Red Sea

### Both pilots were rescued after the 'friendly fire'

**DUBAI, 22 DEC**

Two US Navy pilots were shot down on Sunday over the Red Sea in an apparent "friendly fire" incident, the US military said, marking the most serious incident to threaten troops in over a year of America targeting Yemen's Houthi rebels.

Both pilots were recovered alive after ejecting from their stricken aircraft, with one suffering minor injuries. But the shootdown underlines just how dangerous the Red Sea corridor has become over the ongoing attacks on shipping by the Iranian-backed Houthis despite US and European military coalitions patrolling the area.

The shootdown underlines just how dangerous the Red Sea corridor has become over the ongoing attacks by Houthis ***PHOTO: X@AAMERISMAD***

The US military had conducted airstrikes targeting Yemen's Houthi rebels at the time, though the US military's Central Command did not elaborate on what their mission was and did not immediately respond to questions from The Associated Press.

The F/A-18 shot down had just flown off the deck of the USS Harry S. Truman aircraft carrier, Central Command said. On 15 December, Central Command acknowledged the Truman had entered the Mideast, but hadn't specified that the carrier and its battle group was in the Red Sea.

"The guided missile cruiser USS Gettysburg, which is part of the USS Harry S Truman Carrier Strike Group, mistakenly fired on and hit the F/A-18," Central Command said in a statement.

The aircraft shot down was a two-seat F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter jet assigned to the "Red Rippers" of Strike Fighter Squadron 11 out of Naval Air Station Oceana, Virginia. Central Command said that warships and aircraft earlier shot down multiple Houthi drones and an anti-ship cruise missile launched by the rebels. Incoming hostile fire from the Houthis has given sailors just seconds to make decisions in the past.

On Saturday night and early Sunday, US warplanes conducted airstrikes that shook Sanaa, the capital of Yemen that the Houthis have held since 2014. Central Command described the strikes as targeting a "missile storage facility" and a "command-and-control facility," without elaborating.

Houthi-controlled media reported strikes in both Sanaa and around the port city of Hodeida, without offering any casualty or damage information. The Houthis later acknowledged the aircraft being shot down in the Red Sea. ***—PTI***

**RISING TENSIONS**

# China accuses US of 'playing with fire' over aid to Taiwan

China has strongly opposed United States' move to sell military equipment to Taiwan, which it claims to be its own territory ***PHOTO: X***

**BEIJING, 22 DEC**

The Chinese government has issued a strong protest following the latest announcements of US military sales and assistance to Taiwan, cautioning that the United States is "playing with fire".

On Saturday, US President Joe Biden authorised up to USD 571 million in Defence Department materials, services, and military education and training for Taiwan. This followed a separate approval from the Defence Department on Friday for USD 295 million in military sales.

A statement from the Chinese Foreign Ministry urged the US to cease arming Taiwan and to halt what it described as "dangerous moves that undermine peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait."

Taiwan, a democratic island of 23 million inhabitants, is considered by the Chinese government as its territory, which it insists must come under its control. US military sales and assistance are intended to help Taiwan bolster its self-defence capabilities and deter potential aggression from China.

The recent USD 571 million in military assistance follows Biden's earlier authorisation of USD 567 million for similar purposes in late September. The military sales include USD 265 million allocated for approximately 300 tactical radio systems and USD 30 million for 16 gun mounts.

Taiwan's Foreign Ministry expressed appreciation for the approval of the two sales, stating in a post on social media platform X that it reaffirms the US government's "commitment to our defence." ***—PTI***

## S Korea launches third spy satellite into orbit

**SEOUL, 22 DEC**

South Korea has successfully placed its third homegrown spy satellite into orbit, following its launch from a US space center on Saturday, according to the defence ministry.

The Yonhap News Agency reported that a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket carrying the satellite launched as scheduled at 8.34pm (Korean time) from Vandenberg Space Force Base in California, successfully delivering the reconnaissance satellite into orbit at 9.24pm.

The satellite established communication with an overseas ground station at 11.30pm., indicating that it is functioning normally. This marks the third military satellite launched as part of South Korea's initiative to acquire a total of five spy satellites by 2025. ***—ANI***

# Lara Trump exits from Florida Senate bid, hints at 'big news'

**WASHINGTON, 22 DEC**

Lara Trump, the daughter-in-law of US president-elect Donald Trump, said on Saturday that she is removing herself from consideration to be a Florida senator -- ending speculation that she could replace Republican Senator Marco Rubio, who has been tapped to be the incoming administration's secretary of state.

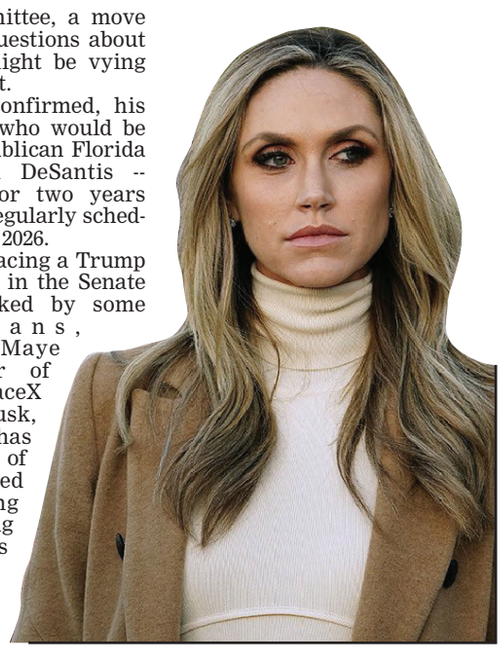
"After an incredible amount of thought, contemplation, and encouragement from so many, I have decided to remove my name from consideration for the United States Senate," Lara Trump posted on X.

Instead, she promised a "big announcement to share in January".

The announcement comes weeks after Trump announced that she was stepping down as co-chair of the Republican National Committee, a move which raised questions about whether she might be vying for a Senate seat.

If Rubio is confirmed, his replacement -- who would be chosen by Republican Florida Governor Ron DeSantis -- would serve for two years until the next regularly scheduled election in 2026.

The idea of placing a Trump family member in the Senate had been backed by some Republicans, including Maye Musk, mother of Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk, who Trump has named co-head of a group tasked with reducing federal spending and regulations during his second term as president. ***—PTI***



## 'Apprentice' producer appointed as UK envoy

**WEST PALM BEACH, 22 DEC**

Mark Burnett, the power producer who helped reintroduce Donald Trump to a national television audience with 'The Apprentice', is being tapped by the president-elect as special envoy to the United Kingdom in his upcoming administration.

"With a distinguished career in television production and business, Mark brings a unique blend of diplomatic acumen and international recognition to this important role," Trump announced on Saturday.

Burnett, who was born in London, helped produce hits like 'Survivor' and 'The Voice', but is perhaps best known for teaming up with Trump for "The Apprentice", which first aired on NBC in 2004. ***—PTI***

A mosque destroyed by Israeli airstrike, in the town of Dardghaya in southern Lebanon, on Sunday ***PHOTO: PTI***

# Israeli strikes in Gaza kill 22

**DEIR AL-BALAH, 22 DEC**

Israeli strikes across the Gaza Strip overnight and into Sunday killed at least 22 people, including five children, Palestinian medical officials said.

Israeli authorities meanwhile allowed Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the leader of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land, to enter Gaza and celebrate a pre-Christmas Mass with members of the territory's small Christian community.

A strike on a school housing displaced people in Gaza City killed at least eight people, including three children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. The Civil Defence, first responders affiliated with the Hamas-run government, had earlier said four children were among those killed.

The Israeli military said it carried out a precise strike on Hamas militants sheltering there.

A strike on a home in the central city of Deir al-Balah late Saturday killed at least eight people, including three women and two children, according to Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, which received the bodies. A man and his wife were killed in a strike in the southern city of Khan Younis on Sunday, just after midnight, according to the nearby Nasser Hospital. A strike on a car in Gaza City killed two people, according to the Health Ministry.

There was no immediate comment from the military on those strikes. ***—PTI***

# '4 women, boy were killed in Germany attack'

**MAGDEBURG, 22 DEC**

Authorities have released further details regarding the tragic incident at a Christmas market in Magdeburg on Friday evening, where a man drove a car into crowds, resulting in the deaths of five individuals. The victims included four women aged between 45 and 75, along with a 9-year-old boy.

The attack left around 200 people injured, with 41 in serious condition, receiving treatment in various hospitals in and around Magdeburg, located approximately 130kms west of Berlin.

The suspect has been identified as a Saudi doctor who immigrated to Germany in 2006 and held permanent residency. While his identity has not been officially disclosed by police, several German media outlets have named him as Taleb A., a specialist in psychiatry and psychotherapy. He was remanded in custody by a judge pending a potential indictment. Having described himself as a former Muslim, the suspect was active on social media, where he shared numerous anti-Islamic posts and appeared to express discontent with what he deemed the "Islamification of Europe."

The attack has reignited debates on migration as Germany enters an early election on 23 February. ***—PTI***

# 32 killed in Nigeria stampede over Xmas gifts

**ABUJA, 22 DEC**

The death toll from stampedes during two Christmas charity events in Nigeria has increased from 13 to 32, police said Sunday. The victims, including at least four children, collapsed during crowd surges as people grew desperate for food items while the country grapples with the worst cost-of-living crisis in a generation.

The dead included 22 people in southeastern Anambra state's Okija town, where a philanthropist on Saturday organised a food distribution, local police spokesman Tochukwu Ikenga said. Ten others died in the capital, Abuja, during a church-organised similar charity event.

Police said they were investigating the two incidents, only days after another stampede in which several children were killed.

Africa's most populous country is seeing a growing trend by local organisations, churches and individuals to organise charity events ahead of Christmas to ease economic hardship caused by a cost-of-living crisis.

Witnesses of the Abuja stampede told The Associated Press there was a crowd surge at one of the church gates, as dozens tried to enter the premises at around 4 am, hours before gift items were to be shared.

Some of them, including older people, waited overnight to get food, said Loveth Inyang, who rescued one baby from the crush. The stampedes prompted growing calls for authorities to enforce safety measures at such events. Nigerian police also mandated that organisers obtain prior permission. ***—PTI***

***PHOTO: X***

- The stampedes prompted growing calls for authorities to enforce safety measures at such events. Nigerian police also mandated that organisers obtain prior permission

## 38 KILLED, 100 MISSING AFTER CONGO FERRY CAPSIZES

**KINSHASA, 22 DEC**

At least 38 people have been confirmed dead and over 100 remain missing after an overloaded ferry capsized on the River Busira late on Friday night. Local officials and eyewitnesses report that the vessel was carrying passengers returning home for Christmas.

The ferry sank just four days after another incident in the northeast, which resulted in 25 fatalities. So far, 20 individuals have been rescued. Joseph Joseph Kangolingoli, the mayor of Ingende, revealed that the ferry, travelling in a convoy of vessels, was primarily carrying merchants heading to Boende from Ingende and Loolo. Witness estimated that the ferry was carrying over 400 passengers, leading to concerns about the true number of casualties. ***—PTI***

**SMEAR CAMPAIGN ALLEGED**

# *Blake Lively sues director for sexual harassment*

**LOS ANGELES, 22 DEC**

Blake Lively has accused her director and co-star Justin Baldoni of sexual harassment and smera campaign during the filming of 'It Ends with Us', as detailed in a legal complaint filed with the California Civil Rights Department. The complaint, obtained by The Associated Press and first reported by The New York Times, also names Baldoni, the studio behind the film, and Baldoni's publicists as defendants.

According to Lively, her allegations included a "multi-tiered plan" by Baldoni and the studio to tarnish her reputation after she raised concerns about "repeated sexual harassment" on set. The complaint describes a strategy involving the creation of negative online narratives, a social media campaign, and the dissemination of unfavourable press coverage.

According to Blake Lively, her allegations included a multi-tiered plan by director Justin Baldoni and the studio to tarnish her reputation ***PHOTO: X***

Lively claims Baldoni coordinated a "sophisticated, well-financed retaliation plan" designed to undermine her credibility. Allegations in the complaint state that he turned to publicists and crisis managers in anticipation of Lively escalating her complaints.

Attorney Bryan Freedman, representing Baldoni and the studio, dismissed Lively's allegations as "completely false" and asserted the studio merely engaged a crisis manager due to multiple threats from Lively during production.

Among Lively's demands for a hospitable work environment were the prohibition of nudity and discussions on pornography, as well as restrictions on Baldoni's personal inquiries about her life. An intimacy coordinator was also mandated for all shared scenes. Lively expressed hope that her legal action would expose retaliatory tactics against those who speak out about misconduct. ***—PTI***

## Railways' accrual accounting to boost green finance: ICAI

**KOLKATA, 22 DEC**

Indian Railways has successfully transitioned to an accrual-based accounting system, a move expected to enhance financial transparency and ease resource mobilization from multilateral agencies and green financing, according to a top official of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI). The transition to accrual accounting is now operational across all 26 zones of Indian Railways in real-time for the financial year 2023-24. Indian Railways initiated the preparation of Accrual-Based Financial Statements in 2014. —*PTI*

## Leather exports likely to grow by over 12% to $5.3B

**NEW DELHI, 22 DEC**

The country's leather and footwear exports are expected to grow by over 12 per cent to USD 5.3 billion in the current financial year on account of healthy demand in key global markets, CLE Chairman Rajendra Kumar Jalan has said. He also said several global companies, including from the US, are showing keen interest in setting up manufacturing bases in India. "Our exports were USD 4.69 billion in 2023-24, and this fiscal, we are expecting it to increase to USD 5.3 billion. Order books are good for the coming months," Jalan said, adding that "huge demand is coming from the US and UK". Indian exporters are exploring business opportunities in Africa as well, he added. He said the industry is labour intensive, providing employment to about 42 lakh people. —*PTI*

## CCPA fines IAS coaching institute for misleading ads

**NEW DELHI, 22 DEC**

The Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) has imposed a penalty of Rs 2 lakh on a coaching institute Shubhra Ranjan IAS Study for misleading advertisements, the government body said on Sunday. The CCPA found that Shubhra Ranjan IAS Study Institute concealed important information about the courses taken by students it claimed had cleared the prestigious Indian Civil Services Exam (CSE) in its advertisements. The institute's ads claimed "13 students in the top 100", "28 students in the top 200", and 39 students in the top 300" in the UPSC CSE 2023, and prominently displayed successful candidates' names and photos, an official statement said. The institute used terms like "Shubhra Ranjan IAS" and "Students of Shubra Ranjan IAS" in its advertisements and letterheads, creating a deceptive impression that Shubra Ranjan is/was an IAS officer, it added. —*PTI*

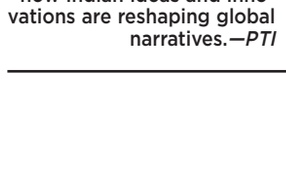


PHOTO: PTI

## Nita Ambani to attend Conference at Harvard

**BOSTON, 22 DEC**

The India Conference at Harvard (ICH) announced on Sunday that Chairperson of Reliance Foundation, Nita Ambani will take centre stage at the highly anticipated India Conference at Harvard, scheduled for 15-16 February, in Boston. The India Conference at Harvard is one of the largest and most influential student-led India-focused conferences in the US. An annual event hosted jointly at Harvard Business School and Harvard Kennedy School fosters dialogue on India's evolving role in global affairs, bringing together thought leaders, policymakers, entrepreneurs, and cultural icons. This year, it will feature 80 distinguished speakers from diverse fields over two days, exploring how Indian ideas and innovations are reshaping global narratives. —*PTI*

# Mcap of top-10 most valued firms slumps ₹4.95 lakh cr

### TCS and Reliance Industries faced the sharpest erosion

**NEW DELHI, 22 DEC**

The combined market valuation of all the top-10 most valued firms plunged Rs 4,95,061 crore last week, in line with a bearish trend in equities, where Tata Consultancy Services and Reliance Industries faced the sharpest erosion.

Last week, the BSE benchmark tanked 4,091.53 points or 4.98 per cent.

"The Indian equity market recorded its steepest weekly decline since June 2022, with the Nifty losing 4.77 per cent. The week began with the US Federal Reserve's announcement, which significantly altered market sentiment.

"Led by Chair Jerome Powell, the Federal Reserve revised its outlook to only two rate cuts in 2025 instead of the previously anticipated four. This shift in policy dampened market confidence," Pravesh Gour, Senior Technical Analyst, Swastika Investmart Ltd, said.

Last week, Indian equity market recorded its steepest weekly decline since June 2022, with Nifty losing 4.77 per cent **PHOTO: PIXABAY**

The market capitalisation (mcap) of Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) slumped Rs 1,10,550.66 crore to Rs 15,08,036.97 crore.

The valuation of Reliance Industries tumbled Rs 91,140.53 crore to Rs 16,32,004.17 crore. HDFC Bank's market valuation eroded by Rs 76,448.71 crore to Rs 13,54,709.35 crore and that of Bharti Airtel tanked Rs 59,055.42 crore to Rs 8,98,786.98 crore.

The mcap of State Bank of India plunged Rs 43,909.13 crore to Rs 7,25,125.38 crore and that of ICICI Bank diminished by Rs 41,857.33 crore to Rs 9,07,449.04 crore.

The valuation of Infosys plummeted Rs 32,300.2 crore to Rs 7,98,086.90 crore and that of Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) fell by Rs 20,050.25 crore to Rs 5,69,819.04 crore.

Hindustan Unilever's mcap declined by Rs 12,805.27 crore to Rs 5,48,617.81 crore and that of ITC went lower by Rs 6,943.5 crore to Rs 5,81,252.32 crore.

In the ranking of the top-10 firms, Reliance Industries retained the most valued firm title followed by TCS, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, Bharti Airtel, Infosys, State Bank of India, ITC, LIC and Hindustan Unilever. —*PTI*

## Former CEA calls GST framework 'national tragedy'

**NEW DELHI, 22 DEC**

- The council announced several changes, including reducing GST on fortified rice from 18 per cent to 5 per cent, exempting critical gene therapies, and clarifying tax exemptions for black pepper and raisins supplied by agriculturists

Former Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian criticized the GST framework following the 55th GST Council meeting in Jaisalmer, calling recent decisions a "national tragedy." He accused policymakers of violating the principles of the "Good & Simple Tax" and warned of increasing complexity and irrationality in the system.

The council, chaired by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, announced several changes, including reducing GST on fortified rice from 18 per cent to 5 per cent, exempting critical gene therapies, and clarifying tax exemptions for black pepper and raisins supplied by agriculturists. Relief was also granted for food distributed to economically weaker sections, which remains taxed at 5 per cent.

However, decisions like raising GST on caramelized popcorn to 18 per cent while keeping salted popcorn at 12 per cent drew criticism for adding unnecessary complexity. Subramanian highlighted such disparities as evidence of a convoluted system, urging a return to simplicity.

—*Agencies*

# Global trends, FIIs to drive markets this week

**NEW DELHI, 22 DEC**

Stock market participants would track global trends and foreign investors' trading activity in a holiday-shortened week ahead, amid lack of any major domestic trigger in sight, analysts said.

Equity markets will remain closed on Wednesday for Christmas.

"Looking ahead, no major events are scheduled. However, a few global economic indicators will be pivotal in shaping the market direction, including the US bond yields, dollar index performance, initial jobless claims, new home sales data.

"Amid heightened volatility and persistent FIIs (Foreign Institutional Investors) selling pressure, investors are likely to adopt a cautious stance. Despite recent weakness, the market outlook remains cautiously optimistic. However, relentless selling by FIIs has added to market pressure," Pravesh Gour, Senior Technical Analyst, Swastika Investmart Ltd, said.

PHOTO: ANI

Last week, the BSE benchmark tanked 4,091.53 points or 4.98 per cent, and the Nifty slumped 1,180.8 points or 4.76 per cent."The sudden change from buying to selling has impacted markets," V K Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist, Geojit Financial Services, said.

The rupee-dollar trend and movement of global oil benchmark Brent crude will also be crucial in dictating the market. "Looking ahead, the week is shortened due to holiday, and participants will closely monitor FII flow trends and global market performance for direction.

Additionally, the scheduled expiry of December's derivative contracts may amplify volatility," Ajit Mishra – SVP, Research, Religare Broking Ltd, said. —*PTI*

**ILLEGAL GAIN OF ₹21.16CR**

# Front-running case: SEBI bans 9 entities from market

**NEW DELHI, 22 DEC**

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has uncovered a front-running scheme involving PNB MetLife India Insurance Company equity dealer Sachin Bakul Dagli and eight other entities, who generated illegal gains of Rs 21.16 crore.

The front-running by these entities continued for more than three years.

SEBI, through an interim order on Friday, prohibited Sachin Bakul Dagli and eight other entities from the securities market and impounded the unlawful gains made by them.

SEBI had conducted an examination into the suspected front running of the trades undertaken by the Big Client, PNB Metlife India Insurance Company Ltd, by certain entities.

The focus of the investigation was to ascertain whether the suspected entity(ies) had front-run the trades of Big Client in connivance with other entities, including dealers and/or fund managers, if any, and thereby violated the provisions of the Sebi's PFUTP ( (Prohibition of Fraudulent and Unfair Trade Practices) rules and Sebi Act.

PHOTO:X

- The regulator noted that Sachin Bakul Dagli and his brother Tejas Dagli accessed confidential, non-public information about impending trade orders of PNB MetLife and Investec's institutional clients

The investigation period has been taken from 1 January, 2021, to 19 July, 2024.

The regulator noted that Sachin Bakul Dagli (equity Dealer, PNB MetLife) and his brother Tejas Dagli (Equity Sales Trader, Investec) accessed confidential, non-public information about impending trade orders of PNB MetLife and Investec's institutional clients.

They used this information to make trading decisions and shared it with Sandeep Shambharkar, who executed front-running trades through the accounts of Dhanmata Realty Pvt Ltd (DRPL), Worthy Distributors Pvt Ltd (WDPL) and Pragnesh Sanghvi. —*PTI*

## 41-year-old Epigamia co-founder dies of heart attack

**BENGALURU, 22 DEC**

**Rohan Mirchandani**, 41-year-old, co-founder of Epigamia, passed away on 21 December, reportedly due to a heart attack, according to sources.

The entrepreneur, in his early forties, was a driving force behind Epigamia, one of India's leading Greek yogurt brands under Drums Food International, which he founded in 2013.

A graduate of NYU Stern and Wharton School, Mirchandani was inspired to launch the brand after identifying a lack of FMCG innovation during a business school lecture. Epigamia gained popularity for its innovative flavoured Greek yogurts.

In December 2023, Mirchandani transitioned to the role of executive chairman, with co-founder Rahul Jain stepping in as CEO. Ankur Goel, COO, and Uday Thakker, director, continue to lead daily operations, supported by Verlinvest, Danone, and Deepika Padukone.

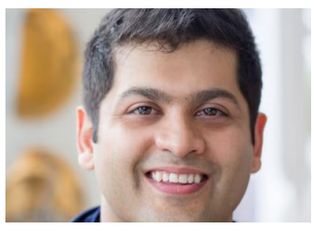


PHOTO: X

A company spokesperson shared, "Rohan's vision and values will guide us as we honor his legacy and build on his dream."

Mirchandani's untimely demise follows other recent losses in the start-up ecosystem, including Pepperfry's Ambareesh Murty and Good Capital's Rohan Malhotra. The industry mourns the loss of a visionary leader whose impact on India's FMCG sector remains profound. —*Agencies*

## Govt to infuse ₹500cr in IFCI to improve its financial health

**NEW DELHI, 22 DEC**

The government has decided to infuse Rs 500 crore capital in state-owned IFCI to improve its financial health ahead of the company's proposed restructuring and consolidation into a group.

With the infusion, the government of India's holding in the company is expected to further increase from existing 71.72 per cent as on September. Capital infusion plan for IFCI was approved through the passage of the first Supplementary Demand for Grants for 2024-25 in Lok Sabha last week.

The Supplementary Demand for Grants for 2024-25 made an allocation for an additional amount of Rs 499.99 crore for 'Subscription to the Share Capital of Industrial Finance Corporation of India. "Taking into account savings of Rs 50.07 crore available in the same section of the grant, the remaining amount of Rs 449.92 crore will be met from surrender of savings available in the capital section of Demand No.30-DEA and it will not entail any additional cash outgo," the Supplementary Demand for Grants said. IFCI had raised Rs 500 crore capital through the issuance of equity shares to the government.

Industrial Finance Corporation of India was set up by the government on 1 July, 1948 as the first Development Financial Institution in the country.

In the second quarter e, IFCI had booked a loss of Rs 22 crore and in the first half of FY24, a loss to the tune of Rs 170 crore.

As part of the revival and restructuring, the Department of Financial Service, Ministry of Finance, last month in-principle approved 'Consolidation of IFCI Group' which entails merger of IFCI Limited and StockHolding Corporation of India Limited and other group companies.

As per proposal, StockHolding Corporation of India Ltd, IFCI Factors Ltd, IFCI Infrastructure Development Ltd and IIDL Realtors Ltd will merge with IFCI Ltd. —*PTI*

## CII calls for reforms in India's priority sector lending

**NEW DELHI, 22 DEC**

Industry body CII has proposed reforms in India's Priority Sector Lending (PSL) framework, suggesting inclusion of emerging sectors and high-impact sectors like digital infrastructure, green initiatives, healthcare, and innovative manufacturing.

Arguing that current Development Finance Institutions like SIDBI and National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development have their roles cut out as they have earmarked sectors to finance, the chamber also suggested setting up of a committee to look at the revision of PSL norms and explore the need for any new DFIs to cater to some of the new and emerging sectors. It ensures equitable credit distribution, contributing to the socio-economic growth of underserved areas. —*PTI*

**15-YEAR-OLD SCANDAL**

# *IOC probes alleged bribery by US firm*

**NEW DELHI, 22 DEC**

State-owned Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) has begun a probe into allegations of a US speciality chemicals firm bribing its officials 15 years back to obtain contracts to supply catalysts, according to a company's regulatory filing.

Albemarle Corporation, a global speciality chemicals supplier that develops and sells catalysts used in the operation of oil refineries, allegedly "paid approximately USD 1.14 million in commission to India intermediary company relating to Indian Oil Corporation business and obtained approximately USD 11.14 million in profits on that business between approximately 2009 and 2011," according to a US SEC order dated 28 September, 2023.

Albemarle was caught for bribery by the US authorities in 2017 and then settled the case in September 2023 by paying a hefty fine of more than USD 198 million to avoid prosecution.

According to the SEC order, an Albemarle consultant and sales agent paid bribes at IOC between 2009 and 2011 **PHOTO: X**

In a filing, IOC said it is "neither party to nor is there any allegation against the company in relation to the proceedings" in the US SEC.

"However, the company has initiated an internal fact-finding review concerning the incident, which allegedly occurred in 2009 to thoroughly understand the facts surrounding these allegations and to determine the appropriate steps to be taken," IOC said.

According to the SEC order, an Albemarle consultant and sales agent paid bribes to unnamed decision-makers at IOC between 2009 and 2011 and to a private sector customer between 2009 and 2017 to obtain and retain catalyst orders and secure sensitive, non-public information for Albemarle.

The agent came into play after the Indian firm threatened to place Albemarle on a "holiday list" as a sanction for purportedly failing to meet a performance guarantee, which would have barred the US firm from future business in India. —*PTI*

## Bihar's time to shine: Minister on ₹1.81 lakh crore investments

**PATNA, 22 DEC**

"Ab humara samay hai" - The time for Bihar has come, said state's Industries and Tourism Minister Nitish Mishra after it received a record Rs 1.81 lakh crore worth of investment proposals in its only second investor meet.

Mishra said the focus will now shift to providing all the promised support to the investors so that the units could start quickly.

Hitherto considered a laggard, the state signed investment commitments with 423 companies at its only second investor meet, Bihar Business Connect 2024, on 19-20 December.

Sun Petrochemicals will invest Rs 36,700 crore in renewable energy projects, including pump hydro and solar plants. Adani Group, which is the largest private investor in the state, committed to investing about Rs 28,000 crore in setting up an ultra-supercritical thermal power plant as well as expanding cement production capacity, food processing and logistics businesses.

NTPC Green has committed to investing Rs 10,000 crore in clean energy projects. SJVN, formerly known as Satluj Jal

NHPC committed an investment of Rs 5,500 crore in setting up a 1,000 MW solar project, while SLMG Beverages (a bottler for Coca-Cola) committed Rs 3,000 crore, Shree Cements Rs 800 crore and Haldiram Snacks Pvt Ltd Rs 300 crore.

The MoUs signed cuts across sectors - from energy to tourism, information technology to food processing and much more, he said. "Bihar is a place where you will have a maximum opportunity for growth." —*PTI*

## Dubai to host India's matches in Champions Trophy

KARACHI, 22 DEC

Dubai has been locked in as the neutral venue to host India's matches in the Champions Trophy with a semi-final and the final also to be staged in the UAE if Rohit Sharma and Co qualify for the knockouts. A reliable source in the Pakistan Cricket Board confirmed that Dubai was chosen as the neutral venue after a meeting between PCB Chairman Mohsin Naqvi and his UAE counterpart Sheikh Nahyan Al Mubarak on Saturday night. On Thursday, the deadlock over the hosting of Champions Trophy finally ended when the ICC announced that India will play their matches of the 50-over event at a neutral venue instead of host country Pakistan, which will get a similar arrangement for tournaments to be held in India till 2027. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

## 4 River Plate women players held for racist slur

SAO PAULO, 22 DEC

Four River Plate women's players were arrested by Sao Paulo police and accused of making a racial slur, said Sao Paulo's public security secretariat. On Friday, a Brazil Ladies Cup soccer semifinal between Argentina's River Plate and Brazilian team Grêmio was stopped in the first half after River Plate's Candela Díaz was accused of making monkey gestures to a ball boy, according to broadcast footage and media reports. Díaz was detained along with teammates Juana Cangaro, Milagros Naiquen Diaz and Camila Ayelen Duarte, the players' lawyer Thais Sankari said. They remained in custody on Saturday. "We see in this decision a great arbitrariness and Brazilian judiciary's desire to send a message. They used this case for that," she said. *—PTI*

## Qinwen exits United Cup to focus on Aus Open

MELBOURNE, 22 DEC

Olympic gold medallist Zheng Qinwen has announced she will not play at the United Cup mixed-teams tournament starting later this month, opting instead to focus on preparations for the 2025 season's first Grand Slam. In a breakthrough season for the 22-year-old, Zheng made the Australian Open final in January before clinching gold at the Paris Olympics and finished runner-up at the WTA Finals to end the year ranked at No. 5. She was due to represent China at the United Cup starting 27 December, but shared her decision to withdraw on social media on Sunday. Zheng's absence means world No. 175 Gao Xinyu will be China's top-ranked female player at the United Cup. The Australian Open begins on 12 January. *—PTI*

## Hyderabad FC will face NE United FC in ISL showdown

HYDERABAD, 22 DEC

Hyderabad FC will host NorthEast United FC in the Indian Super League (ISL) 2024-25 on Monday at the GMC Balayogi Athletic Stadium. According to an ISL release, Hyderabad FC are unbeaten in their last nine encounters against the Highlanders, the longest such streak they hold against any team in the competition. NorthEast United FC come into this match with two wins and a draw from their last five fixtures. However, they have suffered two consecutive defeats, and head coach Juan Pedro Benali will be eager to reverse this trend with a positive result away from home. The Highlanders are currently eighth in the points table with 15 points from 11 matches. *—ANI*

# India wins Women's U19 T20 Asia Cup against B'desh

### India batters struggled against Easmin, who took 4 wickets

KUALA LUMPUR, 22 DEC

India U19 women's team celebrates after victory against Bangladesh PHOTO: X/@BCCI

Opener G Trisha made a doughty fifty before the left-arm troika of Ayushi Shukla, Sonam Yadav and Parunika Sisodia spun web around Bangladesh batters as India scored a 41-run win to emerge champions in the inaugural Women's T20 U19 Asia Cup here on Sunday.

On a spongy pitch, Trisha's 52 off 47 balls (5x4, 2x6) guided India to 117 for seven, but Indian spinners cut through the Bangladesh line-up to bundle them out for 76 in 18.3 overs.

The biggest partnership in Indian innings, in fact in the match itself, was between Trisha and her skipper Nikki Prasad — a 41-run alliance for the fourth wicket.

India batters struggled against pacer Farjana Easmin, who took four wickets.

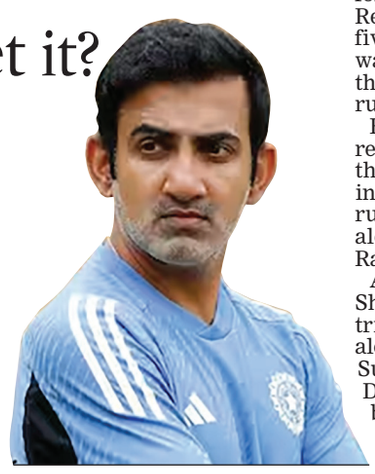
Despite that, India were restricted to a below-par total, and Bangladesh seemed well on track for a win once they reached 44 for two in the seventh over.

However, Ayushi (3/17), Sonam (2/13) and Parunika (2/12) took over from that point as Bangladesh lost remaining eight wickets for a mere 32 runs.

**Brief scores:**
India: 117/7 in 20 overs (G Trisha 52; Farjana Easmin 4/32) beat Bangladesh: 76 all out in 18.3 overs (Juairiya Ferdous 22; Ayushi Shukla 3/17, Sonam Yadav 2/13, Parunika Sisodia 2/12). *—PTI*

## Gambhir wants his team, but will he get it?

MELBOURNE, 22 DEC



It appears that India head coach Gautam Gambhir finds himself caught between a rock and a hard place with Ravichandran Ashwin's retirement.

Gambhir might have to be the Harbinger of Doom for some of the megastars if the currently tied Border-Gavaskar Trophy against Australia does not end up being decisively in India's favour in Melbourne and Sydney.

There are four big names – Virat Kohli, Rohit, Ravindra Jadeja and Mohammed Shami – in dressing room right now.

Meanwhile, India captain Rohit Sharma sustained a blow to his left knee, while Akash Deep hurt his hand at nets, but the pacer allayed any concerns. "These blows are common in training. There are no major concerns because of that," Akash said.

Akash, who along with Bumrah saved India the blushes during the Brisbane Test, said about his performance, "We come to bat lower down the order. So, contributions of 20-25-30 runs are very valuable. I wasn't looking to save the follow-on that day."

Former India coach Ravi Shastri said, "I would like to see Rohit Sharma, his tactics change a bit...I think he's got to be very clear in his mindset to go out there and take the attack to the opposition and not worry about anything else." *—PTI*

Goals from Jhon Duran and Morgan Rogers at Villa Park consigned the four-time defending champion to a ninth defeat in 12 games PHOTO: X

## Loss to Aston Villa deepens Man City crisis

MANCHESTER, 22 DEC

Manchester City's stunning slump deepened after losing to Aston Villa 2–1 in the Premier League.

Goals from Jhon Duran and Morgan Rogers at Villa Park consigned the four-time defending champion to a ninth defeat in 12 games in a season that is unravelling. Pep Guardiola's team has won just once during that run.

"We don't have a defense for the results. They are not good," Guardiola said.

Third-placed Arsenal closed the gap on league leader Liverpool to three points with a 5–1 win at Crystal Palace, but has played two games more.

City dropped to sixth in the standings, nine points below Liverpool, and has played two games more.

"It's about what I can do with my people to get the results back and continue," Guardiola said. "If there is a moment that I cannot overthink, it is right now. Try to be simple, stick to my principles and give certainty to the team."

After winning six titles in seven years and an unprecedented four in a row, City's remarkable fall shows little sign of stopping. While it looks unlikely to win a fifth straight title, a place in the top four and Champions League qualification could also be in jeopardy after fourth-placed Nottingham Forest won at Brentford 2–0 to move four points clear of City. *—PTI*

## NAPOLI BEAT GENOA 2–1 TO LEAD SERIE A

MILAN, 22 DEC

Mario Balotelli almost scored his first goal back in Serie A while Napoli returned to the top after withstanding a late siege from Genoa to hold on for a 2–1 win.

Balotelli returned to Serie A after more than four years in October and has made six appearances, totalling just 57 minutes.

The 34-year-old was sent on with seven minutes remaining against Napoli and almost had an immediate impact as Andrea Pinamonti's glancing header clipped Balotelli's knee but goalkeeper Alex Meret managed to push it off post.

It was one of several decisive saves by Meret in the second half as Genoa came out fighting after going into the break two goals down. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

## Defending champion Kharb bows out in Senior National C'ships

BENGALURU, 22 DEC

Defending champion Anmol Kharb along with five other seeded women's singles players bowed out of the Senior National Badminton Championships after suffering defeats at the pre-quarter-finals here on Sunday.

Anmol, who recently reached the finals of the Guwahati Masters Super 100 tournament, lost 12-21 15-21 to 12th seed Shriyanshi Valishetty, while 16th seed Tasnim Mir packed-off top seed Aakarshi Kashyap 21-19, 21-17 in another match.

On the other courts, 15th seed Shreya Lele continued her impressive run as she came from a game down to beat former champion and second seed Anupama Upadhyaya 13-21, 21-18, 21-14 in a thrilling match.

Devika Sihag, seeded 13th, kept her composure to beat fourth seed and last edition runners-up Tanvi Sharma 21-19, 21-18, while unseeded Rujula Ramu accounted for fifth seed Mansi Singh 21-19, 20-22, 21-13 and 14th seed Sakshi Phogat ended the campaign of sixth seed Adita Rao 21-18, 21-19.

Seventh seed Isharani Baruah, who got the better of the promising Rakshitha Sree S 23-21, 21-19 is now the highest seed left among the last eight and will take on Tasnim Mir in the quarter-finals.

Former world junior championships bronze medallist and second seed Ayush Shetty was the highest ranked men's singles player to be knocked out of the championships as he went down 15-21, 21-11, 5-21 against 14th seed Alap Mishra.

National Games gold medallist M Tharun was no match to former champion Mithun Manjunath's guile. *—PTI*

Anmol Kharb lost 12-21 15-21 to 12th seed Shriyanshi Valishetty on Sunday PHOTO: X

Atletico Madrid players celebrate their victory after the Spanish La Liga soccer match between Barcelona and Atletico Madrid PHOTO: X

## Madrid stuns Barcelona, claims La Liga lead

MADRID, 22 DEC

Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone ran down the touchline in joy while Barcelona players sunk to turf in dismay.

Super sub Alexander Sørloth struck again deep in stoppage time to hand Atletico a 2-1 comeback win at Barcelona and ensure Atletico will spend La Liga's short winter break on top of the table.

Atletico's 12th straight win in all competitions lifted it three points above Barcelona.

Barcelona has only two wins in its last nine games and could find itself third on Sunday if Madrid beats Sevilla.

Simeone, coaching Atletico since 2011, celebrated winning at Barcelona for the first time.

It was a much more impressive performance from Barcelona, which dominated for long periods and took a deserved lead in 30th minute.

Pedri started and ended the move, playing a one-two with Gavi, and firing an angled shot into the bottom right corner. *—PTI*

INDIA WINS BY 211 RUNS

# Mandhana, Renuka blow away WI in first ODI

VADODARA, 22 DEC

Women's Smriti Mandhana during the third T20 International cricket match PHOTO: PTI

Stylish opener Smriti Mandhana extended her purple patch with a classy knock before pacer Renuka Thakur excelled with the new ball as India outplayed a self-destructing West Indies by a record 211 runs in the first Women's ODI here Sunday.

India posted 314 for nine after Mandhana made a fine 91 off 102 balls.

The launch pad was provided by the left-handed opener for the middle-order to go big and that is what the likes of Harmanpreet Kaur (34 off 23), Harleen Deol (44 off 50), Richa Ghosh (26 off 12) and Jemimah Rodrigues (31 off 19) did to take India past 300.

The West Indies were ordinary to say the least in their response as some of their batters gifted wickets to the dominating hosts.

They were eventually all out for 103 in 26.2 overs with Renuka picking her maiden five-wicket haul in ODIs. It was India's biggest win over the West Indies in terms of runs.

Earlier, Mandhana, who recorded a 50-plus score for the fifth time in as many innings, got the bulk of the runs in her 110-run stand alongside debutant Pratika Rawal (40 off 69).

After dropping hard-hitting Shafali Verma, India have tried multiple batters to open alongside Mandhana and on Sunday it was the turn of Delhi cricketer Pratika, who batted at a strike rate of 57.97.

India changed gears after the arrival of fit-again skipper Harmanpreet who struck at close to 150 to give the innings a timely move on. *—PTI*

KING OF CUE

# *Advani wins IBSF title for 28th time*

MUMBAI, 22 DEC

- Advani was flanked by other stars of cue sports as the likes of Kamal, Brijesh, Dhruv Sitwala and Anupama Ramachandran also went on to add to the success story

Cue sports in India have enjoyed plenty of success in the last one year with some proven young players joining the old guards, but one thing has remained a constant in the world of green baize – the relentless domination of Pankaj Advani.

The legend of Advani continued to grow as he extended his rule in the IBSF World Billiards Championships by winning the coveted title for a 28th time.

Advani was flanked by other stars of cue sports as the likes of Kamal Chawla, Brijesh Damani, Dhruv Sitwala and Anupama Ramachandran also went on to add to the success story.

Among the rising stars were Mumbai duo Kreishh Gurbaxani and Ishpreet Chadha – both qualified to compete in the world pro circuit next year.

While Advani was able to win the World Billiards Championship title in a row when he defeated England's Robert Hall in the final in Doha in November, he was not so lucky in the summit clash of the Asian Billiards Championships.

In the final of English Billiards, the Indian legend was beaten by compatriot Sitwala as fortunes swung from one side to another, with the latter eventually emerging the winner.

The win in IBSF World Billiards Championship final was Advani's seventh consecutive title win in competition, which only helped extend his domination further. *—PTI*

The win in IBSF World Billiards Championship final was Advani's seventh consecutive title win in competition PHOTO: PTI